

HOW MANY CARDS?

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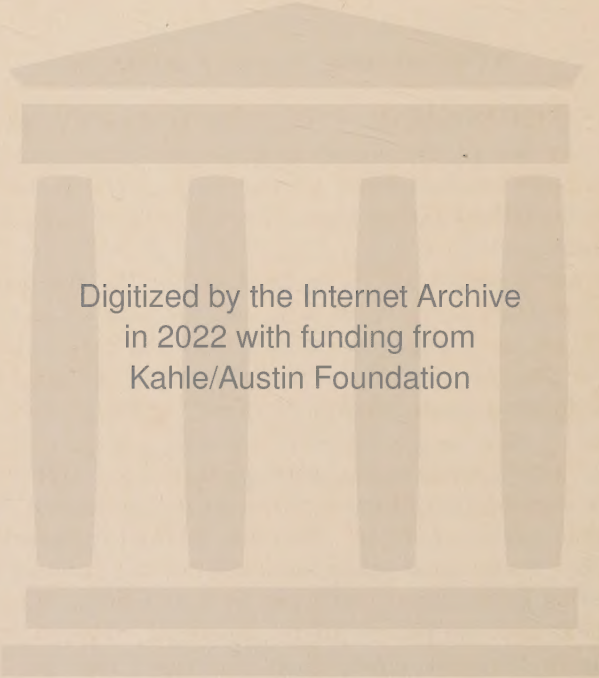
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HOW MANY CARDS?

CHAPTER I

EX-ROUNDSMAN MC CARTY MIXES IN

EX-ROUNDSMAN TIMOTHY McCARTY was taking one of the nocturnal strolls so habitual with him as to have become almost instinctive since the far-off days when, as Officer 804 and one of the finest, he had pounded his beat.

It was a soft April night, starless, for the sky was still overcast from a recent shower, and the odor of wet earth and fresh, springing green things from the park across the avenue blended pleasantly with the smoke of the cigar which tilted upward from beneath his short, stubby, sandy mustache.

McCarty's meditations were pleasant, too, for earlier in the evening he had come off victor in a strenuous debate with his old crony, Dennis Riordan, of the fire department, over old versus new police methods, and the memory of it made his broad shoulders heave in a soundless chuckle.

All at once he paused in his measured, rhythmic tread, his teeth clamped down upon the cigar and his keen, twinkling blue eyes narrowed. A block ahead of him, keeping well in shadow, there slouched a figure whose type had been well known to him in the old days and among whose fraternity his own name had been mentioned blasphemously but with bated breath.

The figure was that of an undersized, narrow-framed man who moved with the slow, crouching poise of a cat. He wore no coat, but what appeared in the uttermost limits

of the rays of a street lamp to be a sweater, and his cap was pulled so far forward over his eyes that the back of his small, bullet-shaped head was plainly visible.

McCarty clutched his stout umbrella more firmly and without obviously quickening his pace he nevertheless narrowed the distance between the slim, slinking figure and himself with every yard. Forgotten was the fact that he had long ago retired from the force to live on the comfortable inheritance from his saloon-keeping uncle; he was once again following his beat and there before his eyes was a crook out to pull off a job!

The houses on the broad avenue which faced the park were veritable miniature palaces, each one occupied by a family whose rank in the social and financial world was of almost national reputation, and before the richest of these in the center of the block ahead the figure paused.

Instantly McCarty flattened himself as much as his girth would allow against the wall of the house he was passing, mentally anathematizing the newer style of American basements which admitted of no protecting high entrances or areaways; but after a moment it was evident that his simple strategy had sufficed, for when he cautiously craned his neck around the slightly projecting cornice the figure had disappeared.

Save for the rumbling and lights of a 'bus approaching from the opposite direction the avenue was deserted and it was inconceivable that in that instant the crook could have made off around the corner.

Moving with almost miraculous speed and silence, McCarty sped to the house before which the figure had paused and one glance showed the meaning of his sudden disappearance. The house was of white stone, wider and more imposing even than its neighbors, but like them with a low, broad entrance door sunk three steps below the level of the street, a smaller tradesmen's entrance some distance away and between them a row of wide, ornate windows.

The second one from the main entrance was open slightly, just enough for a bit of the heavy lace of the curtain to have been caught in the crack and for the tiniest ray of subdued light to creep through.

"The carelessness of him!" McCarty grumbled to himself in disgust at this lack of thoroughness even in one of his sworn enemies. "That light's not moving; did he have the nerve, I wonder, to turn on—!"

His speculations came to an abrupt end and he dived down the shallow steps and crouched waiting to spring, for the heavy window had opened swiftly with no apparent effort at silence, the curtain was whisked aside and the sinuous figure wormed its way through and dropped the scant eight feet which separated the sill from the level of the pavement.

Instantly, before he could turn, a huge, stockily built form hurled itself upon him and in his complete surprise he was borne by sheer weight to the ground where he was held and expertly frisked.

The whole affair had been a matter of seconds and no sound had come from either man save the quick, sobbing breath of the captive and the heavier snort of McCarty, but as the latter stuffed into his own pockets with one hand the pistol, blackjack and skeleton keys which had been the result of his search the other whined:

"Let me go, Mister! Honest t'Gawd, I ain't done a t'ing but just sneak in an'—an' right out! I ain't got nothin' on me, youse knows that! Honest t'Gawd—"

McCarty's answer was to drag the squirming, writhing youth to his feet with a firm grip on the collar of his sweater and with his other hand to pick up the umbrella from where he had dropped it beside him and rap smartly on the pavement for assistance.

"Oh, don't do that! Let me go before de bull comes, mister, for de love o' Gawd! I swear it on me mudder dat I didn't have nothin' to do wit—wit—what's in dere!"

Mixed with the whine of fear there was a rising note of horror in the youth's tones which made McCarty drag him swiftly over to the nearest street lamp. The face which the culprit raised shrinkingly to his was weak and tremulous, with the shifting, rat-like eyes and pasty yellow skin of the typical gangster, but there was something more than the mere fear of being caught at housebreaking in his eyes; mortal terror looked out from them and McCarty's grip on his collar tightened.

"What's in there?" he demanded, giving the all but collapsed figure a violent shake. "I don't know where the devil is Clancy, but what did you leave behind you in that house?"

"I didn't have nottin' to do wit' it, I'm tellin' youse! I just give it one look an' beat it! De foist job I ever tried to put over, an' now—!"

But a tattoo of heavy footsteps came pounding along the sidewalk and in another moment a blue-coated figure dashed up to them.

"What's goin' on here? Somebody rapped. For the love of heaven, 'tis you, Mac! And what have you there?"

"What you should have had if you'd been on your beat, Clancy!" McCarty retorted grimly. "A fine young second-story worker that I've been trailing these four blocks and more, and nabbed just as he was scrambling out of the window of that white house there after he had finished his job."

"I didn't finish no job!" the youth cried desperately. "Honest, I wasn't in dere two seconds! If you was trailin' me, mister, you know dat! I just give it a look an' started to make my getaway. Don't send me to de chair!"

"Chair, is it?" McCarty gave the policeman a significant glance. "I've been trying to get out of him what he did do in there while I was waiting for you to show up."

"We'll take him along and find out," Clancy declared briefly.

"No! Don't take me back in dat house!" the wretched youth wailed. "I don't wanna look at it again! I can't—!"

Unheeding his protestations, they dragged him back the few steps to the house, where McCarty pointed to the opened window from which the subdued light filtering through the lace curtain fell in a delicately patterned square on the pavement.

"Who lives here?" he asked, as the policeman pressed the button at the entrance door.

"Creveling, the millionaire," Clancy responded.

"Not Eugene Creveling, the fellow who used to pull off all those wild stunts on Broadway a matter of ten or fifteen years ago?" McCarty demanded. "They used to call him Million-a-month Creveling!"

"I don't know anything about that," Clancy asserted. "Must have been before my time. All I know is he's got a grand looking wife and barring the big entertainments they give the house is the quietest on the block.—Here, you! Quit that or I'll give you a rap that'll put you to sleep!" This to the struggling youth who now, utterly unnerved, was sobbing wildly. "I wonder if they're all dead in here! Mac, go and try the other bell."

McCarty obeyed but with no result. Save for the low light glowing from the open window the huge house might have been indeed a tomb.

"There's nothing to it, Mac. We can't get anything out of this bird, either, now. You get a hold of him and I'll go in the way he did, through the window."

McCarty gripped the shabby sweater collar once more and Clancy jumped up, caught the sill and swung himself over it, sweeping the curtain aside. It fell again into place and for a minute there was silence.

A second 'bus rumbled past, a limousine or two and a prowling taxi, but none saw the two figures huddled tense in the shadows.

"Say, what are you, mister; a dick?" the youth whined,

passing his sleeve across his slobbered face. "If you trailed me like youse said, you know you didn't hear nottin'! You know I wasn't dere long enough to croak him!"

"Croak who?" demanded McCarty.

"De guy in dere in de soup-an'-fish, wit' his chest all shot to pieces! You know I didn't do it! Dere ain't a pill gone from my gat! If youse an' de bull frames me—!"

There came a rattling of bolts and chains on the inner side of the huge entrance door and it divided and swung slowly inward revealing Clancy standing grave-faced in the aperture and behind him the wide marble staircase and rug-hung gallery of an imposing rotunda.

"Come in," he invited laconically. "I switched on these hall lights myself, but there was some already going in this room back here; come and see what I found."

He led the way across the marble hall, rich in the mellow, subdued colorings of the rugs and draperies under the soft lights, but funereal with the huge, carved chairs ranged in mathematical precision against the walls. McCarty followed with the lagging, handcuffed youth in tow.

The door of a room beside the staircase was open and as they reached it all three paused for a moment on the threshold. It was spacious in itself although small in comparison with the vastness of the hall and was furnished as a study, with two davenports facing each other projecting from either side of the fireplace and a long Jacobean refectory table between. Bookcases lined the walls, a massive writing table stood between two windows at the rear and deeply upholstered chairs were scattered here and there, each with a smoking stand beside it, but McCarty's eyes took in the details with a mere glance.

His attention was riveted on the long figure clad in the perfection of dinner clothes which lay stretched upon the floor. The feet in their glistening pumps were upturned and a gleam of white showed where waistcoat and shirt-

front met, but all the upper part of the body was stained crimson.

Clancy's own face was white, and inured as he was to sights as hideous as this, McCarty felt a wave of nausea sweep over him, while their captive put his manacled hands over his eyes and moaned.

"Is it Creveling himself, do you think?" McCarty asked in a lowered tone.

For reply Clancy knelt beside the body and slipping his hand in the stained waistcoat pocket pulled out a platinum cigarette case as thin as a knife blade, the top of which, barely protruding, had caught his eye.

He held it up for McCarty to see and the latter plainly read the initials upon it: "E. C. C."

"I remember now," he observed soberly. "I saw the name in the papers often enough, years past, to bring it back to me; Eugene Christopher Creveling."

Clancy replaced the cigarette case carefully and pointed to something which lay beside the body. It was a huge army pistol and it lay almost within touch of the finger tips of that limp, nerveless right hand.

"I'll have a word with you, Clancy." McCarty turned and shoved his captive into the nearest chair. "Sit there and if you stir I'll blow the head off you."

But there was plainly no thought of either resistance or flight left in the boy; he half turned and, resting his arms upon the wide-spreading ones of the chair, he buried his face in them.

McCarty drew his confrère to the other end of the room and with an ever watchful eye upon the thief he whispered:

"He never had a hand in it, Clancy. I saw he was up to mischief and I trailed him for four or five blocks, as I told you. I wasn't more than a block away when he skinned in that window and I didn't lose any time reaching the outside of it. There was no shot fired in the meantime and I'd hardly got here when he came squirming out again. I

grabbed him and dragged him over to the light of that street lamp and I saw then that he was scared clean through; he looked as though he had seen a ghost! He's telling the truth, all right; that rat wouldn't have the nerve to stick up a kid coming home from the grocery on an errand for its mother!"

"Did you frisk him?" asked Clancy.

"I did, and found a gat on him that's like a toy cap pistol compared to that gun lying there. Here it is."

He produced the keys, pistol and blackjack which he had taken from the thief and after one look at them Clancy announced:

"We'll send for the wagon and have him held as a material witness; that junk he was carrying will send him up for a stretch, anyway."

After some search they located a desk telephone on the writing table, concealed beneath a bell-shaped bronze ornament and the policeman called up his precinct station house and had the satisfaction of knowing that the message was relayed to the borough headquarters.

"It's too big entirely for them to handle," declared McCarty contemptuously when the other had hung up the receiver. "I'll put a call through myself to general headquarters and tip them off. Maybe my old friend Inspector Druet might be there and could happen along up here before the gumshoes from the bushes have a chance to ball up the game. It's highly irregular, but I'm only a private citizen now, by the grace of my uncle—may God rest his soul—and I'm free to do as I please."

To Inspector Druet, seated at his desk in the homicide bureau, there presently came over the wire a well-known voice, husky with ill-suppressed excitement.

"Mac, you old scoundrel!" he exclaimed in affectionate banter. "Where have you been keeping yourself, and what are you doing this time of night?"

"I'm mixing in high society, sir." McCarty's tones were

cautious. "I'm in a grand private house up on the Avenue facing the park just above the third side entrance—of the park, I mean, sir—and there'll be quite a little party here soon, I'm thinking. Maybe you'd like to get in a little ahead—"

"What is it? Where are you?" The inspector's own tones had crisped. "Mac, have you tumbled headforemost into another—?"

"'Tis the house of Mr. Eugene Creveling, sir; him they used to call Million-a-month. Jim Clancy is here with me and a young crook we copped by the way, but none of the family seems to be at home except himself, and we found him with a bullet in his heart from an army gun."

"I'll be with you," the inspector said briefly and the two receivers clicked in unison.

"It would never have been known until heaven knows when if you hadn't nabbed this bird here." Clancy spoke with reluctant but irrepressible honesty. "By the keys of Saint Peter, Mac, you've pulled off more stunts since you left the force than when you were on it! First that girl who was flung out the window of the Glamorgan and then the other one that was strangled in the crime museum—"

"'Twas Terhune, the great scientific detective, that got at the truth in the first case and the inspector himself who did the work in the other," McCarty remarked with dignity. "I just poked around like the old has-been I am.—But there comes the 'bus from the borough headquarters, and you'll be doing me a favor, Clancy, if you'll just forget I'm here until you're asked to tell what you know of it all. I'd like to snoop around a bit on my own account till the inspector gets here."

"How do we know it isn't suicide, anyway?" demanded Clancy, as the clatter of the police gong grew louder on the air and his companion made for the door.

"Because there are no powder marks that I saw," McCarty replied succinctly. "If he'd held that cannon against

his breast and fired it the powder would have been sprinkled all over the front of him."

As the automobile from the borough headquarters drove up before the door McCarty dodged into the room next to the study. It proved to be a breakfast room, and the ex-roundsman whistled softly to himself as he cautiously closed the door after finding and turning on the wall switch which made the single low light over the table burst into golden glow.

The table was laid for two and the remains of a supper were spread upon it, while an empty quart champagne bottle stood upon the floor and a second one reposed in the cooler in the bottom of which a small quantity of ice still remained unmelted.

McCarty's brows knit at the sight of it, and he pulled out his watch.

"Quarter to three!" he muttered, then turned his attention to the table itself.

The food upon one plate was scarcely touched, but bread crumbs were scattered all about it and the wine glass was empty. On the other hand, the second plate had been cleaned save for fragments, half a roll lay beside it and the glass was half full of dead champagne. Near at hand was an ash tray containing the stub of a cigarette and another unsmoked but broken in two lay in the center of the table.

McCarty was turning away when almost imbedded in the heavy pile of the rug just beneath the end of the cloth close to the champagne bucket something shining caught his eye. It was a broken bit of amber from the mouth-piece of a cigarette holder. He picked it up and shamelessly put it in his pocket.

The subdued purring of a second motor came to his ears and he left the breakfast room and, hurrying across the rotunda, flung open the house door. Inspector Druet was descending the steps.

"Come in, sir," McCarty urged superfluously. "The men are here from borough headquarters and they are holding a grand session in the room where Mr. Creveling was killed—if it was Mr. Creveling himself."

He led his former superior into the breakfast room and pointed to the table.

"Wherever the servants and the rest of the family have got to, there was two people had supper here to-night, as you can see, sir. One of them was contented and pleased, too interested to bother much with his wine, but ate a good meal, though something interrupted him before he finished smoking his cigarette and if he left the room then he didn't take it with him. The other was nervous or angry or scared; couldn't eat, crumbled his bread, drank his wine to keep up his courage but broke his cigarette in two and maybe his holder.—One of them is lying dead in the next room and the other has gone. What's the answer, sir? It's up to you."

CHAPTER II

THE VOICE ON THE WIRE

THE inspector approached the table and gazed thoughtfully down upon its array of porcelain and silver and glass.

"You're getting to be quite in Wade Terhune's class with your deductions, Mac, but you're right, I think," he observed. "If Creveling sat here, where the food is almost untouched and the bread crumbled, it looks as though he might have known what was coming to him, or feared it, anyway. We'll find out what enemies he had—"

McCarty shook his head.

"I don't think so, sir," he said quietly. "I think it was his visitor who sat in that chair. Mr. Creveling was host and all the servants were gone unless they're lying murdered upstairs, so he must have waited on the table himself, and you see the wine cooler is right close up to the other chair. I found this near it on the floor."

He produced the broken bit of amber and the inspector scrutinized it carefully.

"Part of a cigarette holder, eh? A mighty slender one, too, by the curve of this fragment. It looks as though a lady—"

He paused as McCarty picked up the broken cigarette from the table and silently handed it to him. It was but little thicker than a straw and bore in tiny square gold letters the initials E. C. C.

"They're the same as on the platinum case in the waistcoat pocket of the dead man in the other room there," McCarty remarked at length. "I've my opinion of a fellow

that would call a thing like that a smoke, but no matter. Did you take a good look at the supper table, sir?"

"No dope there, beyond what you pointed out." Inspector Druet had turned away. "Let's have a look upstairs before the rest go to it."

But he was too late, for even as he spoke the door of the next room opened and heavy footsteps could be heard crossing the rotunda and mounting the broad stairs. Like conspirators, the inspector and McCarty waited until they died away in the regions above.

"I wonder, now, what they did with the young crook I caught climbing out of the window?" McCarty queried aloud to himself.

"What's that?" Inspector Druet demanded.

Briefly McCarty recounted the events of the night and when he had concluded his companion started for the door leading into the hall once more.

"We'll have a look at the body and then join the rest upstairs. This is a headquarters job all right, Mac, and I'm going to take charge."

"I thought you would, sir." McCarty heaved a sigh of satisfaction not unmixed with envy. "At least you'll not have Terhune with his scientific stunts and mechanical mind-readers butting in on this case."

"How about you yourself?" The inspector halted and bent a quizzical gaze upon his companion. "Going to quit before the end of the first round?"

"Quit?" McCarty flushed. "Well you know, sir, that I'm not in it except maybe to testify against the lad for breaking and entering. I've nothing to do with the murder nor the solving of it."

"But you're itching for a chance, aren't you, you old scout?" The other smiled. "I'll swear you in as a special officer to-morrow, just as I did on the last case you got yourself mixed up in since you left the force. Come on, now."

McCarty's eyes shone and he squared his massive shoulders with proud elation as they entered the room where the master of the house lay. He was officially at work again, and the inhabitants of the instalment-plan suburban colony in which he had invested his savings and from which he drew his modest revenue might run the place to suit themselves until the case was finished. He was back in the old game!

When they opened the door of the study they found that its only occupants were the dead man and the wretched youth who still cringed in his chair, to one arm of which he had now been securely handcuffed. At sight of the inspector's face he uttered a sharp ejaculation and cowered further down.

"Well, well!" Inspector Druet searched his countenance keenly. "It seems to me we've met before, my friend."

"No, sir! Youse got me wrong—!"

"Have I? We've got you mugged down at headquarters; I never forget a face. Have you done time? What's your name? Speak up!"

"Joe Bodansky," the youth muttered sullenly. "I did one stretch in de reform'tory 'cause de gang I traveled wit' swiped some lead pipe, but I didn't have nottin' to do wit' it! Dis is de foist toime—"

"Never mind; thought I had you right. I'll get your story downtown later." Inspector Druet turned to McCarty and indicated the body. "Is this the way it was when you saw it first, Mac?"

"Yes. I was the third one to see it as far as we know; Joe, here, was first, then Clancy and then me. It don't look as if those flatfeet upstairs had disturbed it any except that the gun was lying nearer to the hand, almost touching the fingers—this way."

McCarty stooped and moved the position of the pistol a trifle.

"He sure got his with a vengeance, didn't he?" the inspector remarked.

A quick gleam of light came into McCarty's own eyes.

"Maybe he did, sir," he vouchsafed.

"There seems to have been a bit of a struggle here; look, Mac." The inspector spoke suddenly.

The strip of tapestry which lay along the center of the refectory table had been pulled awry at the end near which the man had fallen and it was evident that only the heavy lamp which stood upon it had prevented it from being swept to the floor, but there were no other signs of disorder in the room.

"Yes, sir," McCarty agreed somewhat doubtfully. "He wouldn't have had time to catch at it in falling, after that shot hit him, but maybe whoever it was did it might have twisted that table cover in rage or excitement before they fired and killed him."

"And you think Creveling was the sort of man to stand calmly and wait without raising a hand to defend himself while his guest worked his own nerve up to the point of murder?" The inspector shrugged. "Come along, let's go up and see what the others have found out."

The patrol wagon clattered up to the entrance at that moment and Joe Bodansky, obviously relieved to be removed from the immediate vicinity of the dead man, even in so grim and forbidding a vehicle, was consigned to the care of its officials.

After it had departed the inspector and his freshly appointed assistant mounted the great staircase to be met at the top by Clancy and two detectives from the borough headquarters. The latter were none too pleased to find an inspector from the central office already on the job but they concealed their chagrin with what diplomacy they could muster.

"Nothing doing up here, Inspector," the senior of the

twain announced. "We've looked in every hole and corner to the very roof and there isn't a soul about, living or dead. Nothing's been disturbed, either, and except for two or three of the servants' rooms it doesn't seem as if any of them had been occupied for some time, not even the master's own apartments."

"Mac, here, and I will just have a look around, anyway, and join you and Sam and Clancy below, Pete," Inspector Druet responded. "The Commissioner has put me in charge but I may need you both."

"Did you send the young crook off in the wagon, sir?" asked Clancy.

"Yes. He'll be taken care of and I'll want your report on him later, but I understand you and McCarty are agreed that he had nothing to do with the main crime, the murder. —Come, Mac."

As the rest descended to investigate the lower regions of the house, McCarty and the inspector crossed the wide corridor and entered the first room of a spacious suite on the left. It was evidently that of the mistress of the establishment, for the delicate lines of the furniture of the First Empire, the fragile ornaments and soft hues of the priceless rugs, all betokened a feminine influence, although the toilet articles and similar objects of intimate daily use were missing and a slight smudge of dust lay here and there as if the effort to keep the rooms in order had of late been merely perfunctory.

"Looks as if the Missis had been away, all right," McCarty observed. "I don't read the society columns as regularly as I might, not having moved in such circles as this before, but I guess we'll know where she is when the boys of the press get hold of this for an 'extra.'"

The rooms across the hall were no less richly appointed, but as unmistakably masculine in appearance as the first suite had been feminine. The furnishings were massive, the color scheme of walls and rugs and draperies dark but

boldly vivid, and despite its unstinted luxury the apartment bore an air of studied simplicity. Its rigid orderliness proclaimed that it, too, had not been occupied recently, but it was well aired and dusted as if in preparation for the immediate return of the owner.

In the lounging-room which opened off the bedchamber Inspector Druet approached an antique mahogany desk which stood in one corner and opened one drawer after another, while McCarty watched speculatively over his shoulder. They seemed to be filled with account books and miscellaneous correspondence mostly of a financial nature, and the latter was turning away when his superior paused with his hand upon the knob of the small drawer between the pigeon holes.

"Locked," he remarked succinctly. "And there isn't any keyhole."

"Then it works with a spring," McCarty suggested. "Million-a-month Creveling may not have dropped all his old philandering ways when he married, but he'd scarcely be likely to leave anything of a confidential nature in the place where his wife would first of all be looking for it, granted that she was of the looking kind."

"We have no time to bother with it now, at all events," the inspector remarked after several futile attempts to open the drawer. "I'll have an expert up here the first thing in the morning, but we had better be getting on through the house now; it's almost four o'clock."

Together they continued their inspection of the upper floors, but found nothing even remotely bearing on the investigation until they came to the topmost one, where the servants' quarters were evidently located. Here two connecting bedchambers and a third across the hall bore mute testimony not only of occupation but of hurried departure.

In the first room dresses and aprons of a plain, serviceable quality were scattered about and in the adjoining one the half-opened closet door and drawers of the bureau re-

vealed the habiliments of a butler dragged forth in obvious confusion.

The room on the other side of the landing was fitted out with a higher grade of furniture than the other two, worn but comparatively luxurious, as though the articles might have been relegated here from below stairs. An examination of the tailor's tabs on the suits which filled the clothes closet revealed that they had evidently been discarded from Creveling's own wardrobe.

"His valet, probably," McCarty hazarded. "The butler and one of the women servants must have occupied those rooms across the hall."

"That's obvious," retorted the inspector. "They may have been here last night and made a getaway when the murder was done, but if we can find the housekeeper's books we can get a line on who they were. The other rooms on this floor don't look as though they had been entered for weeks—"

"What's that—?" McCarty suddenly raised a thick, stubby finger in warning and cocked his ear.

"What?" the other demanded in curt tones.

"I thought I heard a sound downstairs, sir. Not all the way, but on the first sleeping floor."

"One of those flatfeet from borough headquarters, I suppose," the inspector grunted. "I didn't hear anything; you must be getting nerves, Mac! That big room at the back may have been the housekeeper's. Let's have a look at it anyway."

Obediently McCarty followed his superior down the hall, but as he did so he cast a swift glance at the stairs. Did he or did he not see a flitting shadow pause immovable just above the edge of the top step and then disappear?

Without comment he entered the room at the rear. The furniture was of walnut in severe lines, the rugs dark and spotless and the few pictures which broke the somber monotony of the gray wallpaper were of sedate, classic subjects.

A businesslike-looking desk stood near the window, but it was quite bare, and no intimate touches of human occupancy were visible save a tea-wagon covered with dusty porcelains drawn up beside the cold hearth.

"The housekeeper's room all right, I guess," remarked the inspector, as one after another he tried the drawers of the desk. "These are all locked and I don't see any keys about. It is pretty obvious that nobody has been in here, either, for some time. The whole thing looks funny to me, Mac. Of course, the three servants whose rooms have been occupied at least lately may have been left as caretakers while the family were away, but why did Creveling come back here just to give that little supper and get himself murdered after it—what in the world are you doing now?"

For McCarty was lifting the desk carefully, first from one side and then from the other and shaking it tentatively when he had raised an end from the floor.

"Well," he replied at length, "there would be little object, wouldn't there, sir, in locking an empty desk? Of course, we could force the drawers but I'm thinking it's small help you'd get from what's in here in solving the mystery downstairs. The locks are rusty, too, as you'll notice. Did you try the dressing-table?"

"Yes. The drawers are unlocked and empty. There's nothing more here, Mac; let us go down now and see what the rest have discovered."

But it was evident that no discovery of any significance had been made.

Sam and Pete, the two detectives from the borough headquarters, together with the policeman, Clancy, were standing in a little group near the body of the dead man in the study and the faces of all three bore an expression of stupefaction.

"Anything new turned up?" asked Inspector Druet crisply.

"No, sir. The kitchens are all in order, though it's evident that they have been used lately, but not for the supper

that we found spread out in the next room." Pete, the elder of the two detectives, replied: "That came from Mazzarini's, the caterer; his boxes are down in the pantry now."

"There's food and ice left in the refrigerators," the other detective, Sam, volunteered. "But it's not the kind of stuff the likes of him would eat."

He pointed with a grimy thumb at the dead man and was evidently about to continue his remarks when the inspector demanded:

"Have any of you boys been upstairs since we left you on the second floor?"

"No, sir." It was Clancy who answered. "There was nothing to take us up there, and plenty to look over down here though it is little enough that we found out!"

"You see, Mac?" The inspector turned with a grin to McCarty. "I told you that you were hearing things when you thought there was a sound from below while we were on the servants' floor!—Look here, Clancy, you've been on this beat nearly six months; you ought to know about how many there were in the household."

"I think I do, sir, and I can't get it through my head where they've all gone to," responded the officer. "To my knowledge there were ten of them, not counting the housekeeper; the cook was the butler's wife, and besides there was a footman, valet and houseman, then the kitchenmaid, housemaid, parlormaid and laundress, and the lady's maid, of course. The valet I almost never saw, but it comes to me now that the cook and the butler are the only ones I've noticed around for some time."

"What do you mean by 'some time'?" barked the inspector.

"Weeks, anyway, sir; maybe a month." Clancy shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "Not since a few days after the last big entertainment the Crevelings gave."

"When was that? What sort of an entertainment?"

"How should I know, sir?" the officer replied to the last

question. "'Twas a dinner or dance or something; awnings and a red carpet spread out to the curb and an orchestra playing till all hours, and a string of motor cars reaching around into both side streets. Except when they give some big society shindy like that the house is the quietest on the block, as I was remarking to McCarty only to-night.—But where is he?"

Clancy had turned for superfluous corroboration to the spot where the ex-roundsman had stood behind his chief, to find that he had vanished.

"I thought that I heard the front door close just now, sir," Pete observed.

"You're getting jumpy, like Mac," the inspector laughed. "You couldn't drive him out of the house now that he's on the old trail again; wait till you boys retire and then open the papers some fine morning and find a fresh murder mystery staring you in the face and the force being raked over the coals for not pinching the man who did it before the first edition reached the press! There isn't one of the three of you who wouldn't want to be back in harness with a chance to clap his hand on the shoulder of the murderer! —Mac's only poking around on his own account, but Clancy, this looks bad for you; a prominent citizen shot to death in his own house on your beat with an army .44 that could be heard a mile off, and it took a cheap crook to discover the crime!"

Clancy turned a rich crimson.

"Everything was quiet and the house dark when I went my rounds up to near midnight, sir," he said with dignity. "We'd received no notification of the family being away or any special watch being necessary. Besides, there's a private watchman employed on this block, the same as on the others up and down the Avenue. It did come to me as strange that I didn't run into him, but I thought no more about it. There's many a night I don't see him."

"You say that the house was dark up to nearly twelve

o'clock," repeated Inspector Druet. "When did you notice first that it was lighted?"

"At about a quarter before; I rang in at the box on the next corner ten minutes afterwards, more or less." Clancy's tone was cautious. "The faint little stream of light coming from the window here on the first floor meant nothing to me, for I'd often seen it till near dawn, and lots of the ground floor windows are left open the night long in all the residences on my beat this mild spring weather. I passed regular, and not once did I hear the sound of a shot or anything else, for that matter, but the motor cars going up and down the Avenue."

"What was the first you knew of this affair, then?"

"When I heard a pounding on the sidewalk, as though some one was rapping for help. That must have been a little after two o'clock, and I was a couple of blocks away. I saw two figures standing under the lamp post out there and I came on the run. It was McCarty and the young second-story crook that he'd nabbed crawling out of the window here half a minute after he'd got in."

Clancy continued his narrative with impartial justice to the ex-member of the force and much dramatic detail as to his own finding of the body, and at its conclusion McCarty reappeared. He entered silently and took up a respectful position in the background, his face guilelessly stolid as the inspector went to the telephone and called for the chief medical examiner, turning in a brief report to headquarters.

"Did you find out anything, Mac?" asked Clancy anxiously in an undertone.

McCarty shook his head.

"What could you find out in an empty house?" he countered evasively.

"Well, there's a smell on you as though you had been to some high-toned barber's, and Pete thought he heard the front door close awhile back."

Clancy sniffed the air audibly, much as a dog on the scent, and McCarty's twinkling blue eyes narrowed for an instant as he backed slightly away from the other man.

"Barber's, is it?" he repeated in great disdain. "I've been poking around the rooms upstairs and some of them smell yet of perfumery; Pete must have heard me closing a door up there behind me, if he heard anything at all. It's a wonder you and the boys wouldn't get on the job and do something before the papers get hold of this, and you have a howling mob of reporters storming the house!"

"It's up to the inspector," retorted Clancy sullenly. Then his tone changed. "There's a bell ringing somewhere!"

Inspector Druet had turned sharply and the two detectives glanced at each other. There was silence for a moment and then the subdued but insistent peal was repeated.

"You answer it, Mac," the inspector ordered. "Try the front entrance door first. The medical examiner or one of his assistants wouldn't have had time to get here, and it's five o'clock in the morning."

McCarty crossed the wide rotunda and even as he flung open the front door the bell rang once more through the silent house.

A middle-aged gentleman, small but erect and dapper despite the evident haste with which he had clothed himself, stood fuming on the threshold.

"Who are you?" he demanded peremptorily. "What is the meaning of this? Where is Mr. Creveling, and why have I been summoned from my bed at this unseemly hour? I insist upon an explanation—!"

"Just a moment, sir." The inspector had followed McCarty and the latter stood aside. "I am afraid that before you get your explanation I must ask you who *you* are, and who summoned you. I am from Police Headquarters."

The little man shrank back aghast and his Vandyke beard, tinged with gray, waggled in outraged amazement as McCarty shut the massive double doors behind him.

"'Police'!" he gasped. "What on earth has Eugene—I demand to see Mr. Creveling at once!"

"I am afraid that is impossible," Inspector Druet replied smoothly. "Will you answer my questions, please? What brings you here at what you yourself have admitted is an unusual hour?"

"'Unusual'!" the newcomer exploded. Then with an obvious effort he calmed himself and responded in dignified resentment:

"I am George Alexander, Mr. Creveling's banking partner and the uncle and former guardian of Mrs. Creveling. That should be sufficient answer to you, sir. Will you inform me why I have been routed from my bed—?"

"Who sent for you, Mr. Alexander? Who told you to come here?" The inspector's tone was deferential but it held a note of unmistakable sternness.

"That is a point upon which I should like to be informed!" retorted the other. "I played my usual rubber of bridge at the club, went to my rooms and retired at eleven. A few minutes ago I was aroused by my telephone and told that I was urgently needed here at once. I expostulated but could gain no further information, so I dressed and came."

"Did you recognize the voice over the wire?"

Mr. Alexander paused thoughtfully and then replied with conviction:

"No. It was that of a man, of course, but it was totally strange to me, and when I demanded my informant's identity he hung up the receiver. I am quite sure I have never heard it before."

CHAPTER III

INQUIRIES

THE inspector turned involuntarily and glanced at his subordinate, but McCarty's face was blandly inscrutable.

"Mr. Alexander," began Inspector Druet, "your informant was unauthorized by the police department, and we have no more knowledge than you as to his identity, but your presence here is more than welcome in this emergency. Certain suspicious circumstances, the details of which you will learn later, caused an investigation of the house between the hours of two and three this morning by the regular officer on this beat. The premises were found to be deserted although a light was burning and the remains of supper for two are spread out in the breakfast room. In the study, or den, there lies the body of a man in evening clothes shot through the heart and it has been identified as that of Mr. Creveling."

"Eugene—shot!" the banker gasped. "Impossible! Good God, I cannot believe it! Why, only yesterday we had a long conference at the office—! But who could have done this thing?"

"The pistol—an army .44—lies within touch of his fingers," replied the inspector.

"You mean to insinuate that he killed himself?" Mr. Alexander bristled, but he seemed to shrink even more within his light spring overcoat. "Ridiculous! What reason could he have for such an act? His affairs were never in better shape; the conference at the office yesterday was in regard to a large loan we contemplated making which would

have brought us in highly advantageous returns and he had no other problems or troubles, no entanglements of any kind!"

"Come and see him for yourself." The inspector turned and led the way to the study with Mr. Alexander following and McCarty bringing up the rear. As they entered Clancy and the two detectives stepped aside exposing the motionless form outstretched upon the floor, and with a shocked exclamation the banker recoiled.

"It is he!—But Eugene never killed himself! Of that I am as sure as though I had been present when the deed was done!"

"Why are you so certain, Mr. Alexander?" the inspector asked.

"There could have been no reason," the other repeated. "No one ever loved life better than he or knew how to enjoy it to the full. He had an unassailable position both in the social and financial world, a beautiful wife, a host of friends—oh, it is unthinkable!"

"Yet the pistol is almost within his grasp," Inspector Druet reminded the banker. "Was he right or left-handed?"

"Right, but any one could have placed the weapon there after the crime was committed to make it look like a case of suicide." Alexander responded defensively. "Besides, who telephoned to me, and why?"

"That we must ascertain later." The inspector shrugged. "Do you recognize the pistol, Mr. Alexander? Have you ever seen it in Mr. Creveling's possession?"

"I have not, sir." The banker shook his head decisively. "It may have been his, of course. A man whose home was filled with valuable objects of art and whose wife's jewels constituted a huge fortune in themselves would be naturally supposed to guard against burglary, but he could have had no personal reason for such an article of self-protection."

The sound of another motor car outside and the ringing of the front door bell put a stop for the time being to any

further questioning by the inspector, and as one of the assistants of the chief medical examiner was ushered in the dead man's partner turned to McCarty.

"Are you one of those in charge here? If so, for God's sake, take me out of this for a while! I can't stand it! The shock—I!"

It was the moment for which McCarty had been waiting.

"Come this way, sir. They'll call if you're needed." He drew the banker out to the hall and into the breakfast room, where he switched on the light once more and pulled forward a chair suggestively with its back to the disordered supper table. "Sit here, Mr. Alexander, and rest yourself. I'm not connected with the police force, if that's what you mean; I just happened by, and I'm a friend of the inspector. It must have been a terrible shock to you, as you say, to find the house deserted and Mr. Creveling killed like this!"

"The abrupt summons over the telephone was startling enough, but to lose my partner in this hideous, tragic way!" The banker sank into the chair and pressed his delicate, blue-veined hands over his eyes for a moment.

"I think, sir, you said that Mrs. Creveling was your niece?" McCarty asked slyly.

Mr. Alexander's hands dropped and he gazed at the other in a dazed fashion.

"Yes. She was my late brother's only child and my ward until her marriage to Eugene eight years ago. It will be a most—most distressing homecoming for her.—By Jove, we must wire her at once! I had forgotten—I!"

"Mrs. Creveling is away?" McCarty's ingenuous blue eyes opened still wider. "That is why, then, that the house was all deserted."

He added the last as if to himself, but the dazed look faded partially from Mr. Alexander's eyes and a shade as of caution crept into them.

"Mrs. Creveling has been paying a round of visits on

Long Island for the last few weeks and Mr. Creveling has been living much at the club since his presence was required almost constantly in town on this banking matter we were arranging to negotiate." His explanation came with nervous haste. "I believe two or three of the servants were left here temporarily as caretakers, though; I cannot imagine where they may have gone. However, Mrs. Creveling must be sent for at once! May I ask that you arrange with the inspector to have one of those men in there dispatch a wire immediately to her in care of Mrs. Douglas Waverly, Broadmead, Long Island?"

"And what shall he say in the telegram, sir?" asked McCarty as he prepared to comply. "You don't want to tell her in cold blood that her husband has been shot, do you?"

"Heavens, no!" The little man recoiled. "Just explain that a serious accident has occurred and her immediate return is imperatively necessary. I—I cannot think! I confess that I find it almost impossible to pull myself together! This horrible thing—!"

"I understand, sir." McCarty's tone was full of respectful sympathy, but he paused with his hand on the door knob. "I wonder, now, you knowing Mr. Creveling so well, if you'd remember whether or not he smoked his cigarettes with an amber mouthpiece?"

"An amber mouthpiece?" the other repeated in unguarded surprise at the petty, irrelevant question. "No, he never used a holder of any sort.—But the telegram—!"

"I'll see that it goes at once, Mr. Alexander." McCarty closed the door behind him, and when he entered the room where the medical examiner's assistant was concluding his grim business the ex-roundsman's face did not betray by the flicker of an eyelash that he had stumbled on a clew, albeit a slender one. The inspector drew him aside at once.

"Creveling has been dead at least four hours," he announced. "The Doc seems to think he shot himself, al-

though he wants an autopsy for form's sake, and it's just as well. We'll let it go at that for a day or two anyway till we've something to spring on the Old Man. Where's Alexander?"

"In the next room. He wants a telegram sent at once to Mrs. Creveling. It seems that she's visiting a Mrs. Douglas Waverly at Broadmead, Long Island."

McCarty rapidly detailed the substance of his brief talk with Alexander and of the message to be sent and one of the detectives was despatched to the nearest telegraph office. The medical examiner's assistant also took his departure after arranging for the removal of the body for a formal autopsy and the inspector and McCarty returned to the breakfast room.

"Mr. Alexander," Inspector Druet recommenced his interrogation without any preamble. "My friend, here, says that you told him Mrs. Creveling had been visiting on Long Island for several weeks and her husband living at the club. Was he in the habit of returning here to his home to give midnight suppers when it was virtually closed and the staff of servants away?"

George Alexander, whom they had found standing by the table frowningly contemplating the débris of the supper, turned and faced them at the question and its implication.

"I know little of my late partner's habits," he replied stiffly. "In our banking business we deal with many foreign powers among the representatives of which each have our own especial clients, and not until all the preliminary negotiations have been concluded do we have a general conference. Mr. Creveling and I are known to have arranged several international loans of a confidential nature—you know how such affairs creep out through the underground channels of diplomacy—and it is quite probable that he may have brought a prospective client here to-night rather than to a restaurant or club in order to insure privacy. Is

it not at least probable also that after the departure of his guest he may have been attacked by burglars? You gentlemen of the police know that many an army pistol is now in the hands of a member of what I believe you term the 'underworld.' "

The inspector shrugged.

"The medical examiner who has just been here affirms that Mr. Creveling shot himself," he observed. "Mr. Alexander, you said that Mr. Creveling had no troubles of any sort. This may seem like an impertinent question but we must know the truth, and it is bound to come out in the end. Was he in no domestic difficulty? He and his wife seem to have been virtually living apart and the house left in the hands of caretakers—"

"Nothing of the sort!" the banker interrupted indignantly. "I am of an older generation, an older school than was Eugene, and their friends were not mine, but his wife was my niece and I should have been the first to know of any discord. To my mind they were a model, modern couple, independent in thought and action, but mutually considerate, and I can assure you that a very real affection existed between them. My partner was a man's man, caring little for society although his wife reveled in it. This was perfectly understood by their friends and the house here was frequently left in the hands of caretakers, especially in the spring and autumn when my niece—Mrs. Creveling—made a round of country house visits and Eugene preferred his club to an empty house, naturally."

"You say their friends were not yours, that they moved in a different set," the inspector interposed. "You must, however, have heard your partner and your niece mention from time to time those with whom they were most intimate."

Mr. Alexander's lips closed in a tight line.

"Mrs. Creveling was twenty at the time of their mar-

riage and ceased to be my ward a year later; Mr. Creveling and I seldom discussed anything but business."

"How long have you and Mr. Creveling been in partnership?"

Mr. Alexander stroked his beard for a moment in evident hesitation before he replied:

"Since about the time of his marriage to my niece, although his family and ours have known each other for generations."

"Had Mr. Creveling been engaged actively in any financial pursuits prior to that?" Inspector Druet continued.

"I cannot say that he had, beyond speculating now and then on the market," the banker answered with yet more obvious reluctance. "But I really do not comprehend the significance of these questions at such a time as this. Mr. Creveling was a very rich man, but naturally the prospect of marriage made him ambitious to become something more than a—er—mere art dilettante—"

"And Broadway spender?" broke in McCarty irrepressibly.

Mr. Alexander's eyes shifted.

"I presume you refer to the unfortunate sobriquet of Mr. Creveling's college days, and which erroneously clung to him for years after he had reached maturity," he said. "Irresponsible youth and the possession of too much money have formed a dangerous combination before now but my partner has been unknown in the bright light district, save at an occasional theater party with his wife and their friends, for several years."

"Mr. Alexander," the inspector bent forward suddenly, "when I asked you just now if you knew who Mr. and Mrs. Creveling's intimates were you evaded the question; in the face of this tragedy they are bound to be discovered and fully investigated. You said also that you seldom discussed anything but business with your partner and that your

guardianship of his wife ended a year after their marriage. Does that mean, too, that your social relationship with them was interrupted? That, in fact, there was any estrangement between you and them?"

"Most assuredly not!" The banker squared his somewhat narrow shoulders. "My niece made her home with me prior to her marriage and the greatest possible affection has always existed between us. As their only relative I have been a frequent visitor here, but I have already told you that their friends are in a different circle—"

As he spoke the slow, measured tread of heavy feet in the hall outside told of the temporary departure of Eugene Creveling from his home, before his final return for the brief scene in which he would be the principal but silent actor, and involuntarily his late partner paused, shuddering again.

The remaining detective from borough headquarters appeared in the doorway, with Clancy behind him, and both stood awaiting further orders.

"There's nothing more for either of you to do here now," the inspector announced. "Sam, have your report sent in to me downtown; Clancy, make your own to the Old Man and I'll look it over later. If that young crook tries to get hold of a shyster lawyer, ask the Commissioner to stall him and keep him quiet until I get back to Centre Street myself."

As the two men turned to go, McCarty went to the door.

"You'll not be needing me now for a bit, Inspector?" The statement was a question asked with the ingratiating which only the ex-roundsman could command. "I'll have another look over the ground—"

"Go as far as you like, Mac," Inspector Druet responded heartily, then turned once more to Mr. Alexander. "Who were the Crevelings' intimate friends, as far as you know? This Mrs. Douglas Waverly, for instance, whom Mrs. Creveling is visiting; do you know anything about her?"

The banker smiled slightly in a somewhat relieved fashion.

"She was born a Preston, of Washington." He spoke as though that was sufficient answer in itself. "Her husband is the son of old Monro Waverly, the tight-fisted Scot who developed a passion for speculation late in life, in the 'eighties, and amassed millions. Besides Broadmead the Douglas Waverlys have a town house a block or two below here. I have met them occasionally."

"Who were the others in the Creveling set?"

"An Irish aristocrat, if there be such a thing left, named O'Rourke and his wife who I believe has a title in her own right but refuses to use it, at least in this country; then there is a Mr. and Mrs. Ford, and I believe a Mrs. Culp or Kip, or some such name—really, you must ask my niece—!"

"We'll leave her out of it for the time being," the inspector interrupted crisply. "You said that Creveling was a man's man; who were his associates aside from those in his wife's social circle?"

"He belonged to most of the best clubs in town, but I am not in a position to tell you with whom he associated." The note of defense was again evident in the banker's tones. "If he had any hobby beyond an innate love of beautiful things and a desire to acquire them I never learned it and I have found that it is only through a knowledge of a man's hobbies or predilections that one can gauge the type of individual to whom he would naturally be drawn as a congenial companion."

Mr. Alexander halted suddenly as though he had said too much, and the inspector glanced at him sharply.

"It did not occur to you to interest yourself in your partner's companions and mode of life outside of his family and business?" he asked.

"Why should it have?" the other countered defiantly. "My niece's married life with him appeared to be ideal according to modern standards, our partnership was success-

ful and without friction of any sort and I was content. My own social interests, as I have told you, lay with an older, more staid school; a quiet round of golf or rubber of bridge, an occasional opera night or evening with my books or friends of my own generation; that for years has been my life after banking hours, Inspector."

Inspector Druet frowned thoughtfully.

"Conservative, eh? Why, then, Mr. Alexander, were you willing to enter into partnership with a man who you admit had no knowledge of business even if he was the husband of your niece?"

Once more a dull flush swept over the features of the dapper little man before him.

"I consider that question an impertinence, sir, but I have no reason to evade a reply to it except a natural aversion to discussing my private affairs with those for whom they can have no possible concern. I have already told you that prior to our entrance into partnership Mr. Creveling had speculated occasionally in Wall Street. Since he was to marry my ward I watched his operations and conceived a sincere admiration for his acumen. I realized that although he did not know the banking business I could trust his judgment; he brought the necessary capital into our concern and I the experience. It was an ideal combination which to-night's tragedy has so unfortunately broken."

"I see." The inspector nodded. "Was there any connection, Mr. Alexander, between that partnership and your niece's marriage? To put it bluntly, was the partnership a stipulation of the alliance? Mrs. Creveling was your ward; had she any fortune of her own?"

"You go too far, sir!" Mr. Alexander's eyes flashed. "The marriage was a love match; because of that alone I consented to it. Mrs. Creveling's fortune was not great but there is no older family than ours in America, and had she desired she could have made a far more brilliant alliance, in spite of Mr. Creveling's money. I—I decline absolutely

to answer any more of your questions until I learn my rights in this affair. I do not understand the trend of this interrogation, nor do I consider it pertinent to the crime you are investigating.—For it is a crime, no matter what your assistant medical examiners or any other so-called officials of the police department may assume. Eugene Creveling was murdered!”

“I beg pardon, sir!” A voice whose studied deferentiality was evident even in the shocked accents which now punctuated it was heard behind them and both men turned. In the doorway stood a thin, smooth-faced individual of perhaps thirty-five and upon his austere, almost clerical features deep concern struggled with curiosity and alarm. “I have just returned—arrived, I should say—in accordance with Mr. Creveling’s instructions, but he is not in his room. I hope nothing is wrong, sir? I knocked but you did not reply and I could not avoid hearing—”

“Oh, it’s you, Frank!” Mr. Alexander spoke with obvious relief at the other’s appearance, although his tone was fittingly lugubrious. “I regret to inform you that something very terrible has happened to your master. This is an inspector from police headquarters—”

“Who are you?” Inspector Druet stepped forward.

“Mr. Creveling’s man, sir. Frank Hill is my name.” The valet’s tone was still respectful, but there was a shade less of deference in it, although he spoke nervously.

“When did you last see your employer alive?”

“At eleven o’clock this—last night, sir, in his rooms at the club.”

“Where have you been since then?”

The man wet his thin lips and replied in a low, hesitating voice:

“On a private matter. My time was my own, sir. I—I had rather not say.”

CHAPTER IV

THE TORN CARD

MEANWHILE, McCarty had taken advantage of his superior's off-handed permission and slipped back into the study immediately after the body had been removed and Clancy and the detective had taken their departure.

Save for the dark stains upon the rug where the shattered form had rested and the strip of tapestry pulled awry from its accustomed place upon the refectory table, there were no visible signs left to the casual eye of the tragedy which had so recently taken place within those four walls, but McCarty closed the door carefully behind him and stood for a moment with his back against it surveying the room.

The chairs with their adjacent smoking stands, the book-cases, davenport, and every article of furniture which the room contained, passed in swift but unerring detail before his vision and he whistled softly.

A delicate spring dawn was filtering in through the diaphanous curtains of the windows at the rear and turning the golden glow of the electric lights a sickly lemon yellow; why had the shades not been lowered or the thick draperies which hung on either side of the casements been drawn?

McCarty switched off the lights and striding over to the nearest window thrust aside the curtains and opened it. The explanation for the disregard of possible onlookers was instantly apparent, for a sheer blank brick wall rose before him about six feet distant. He glanced swiftly each way and then withdrew his head, leaving the window open that the gentle breeze might drift through the room. The

blank space, or alley, had no opening at either end and had evidently been left when the Creveling residence was built in order to give light to its rear windows.

Yet the house was practically in the middle of the block and beyond that brick wall could lie only the back yards of the buildings which faced on the side streets. Had Creveling caused that high blank barrier to be erected on the edge of his property for the purpose of insuring absolute privacy to the rooms which looked out upon it? The front of the house was no more carefully secluded from outside observation than were the others in the neighborhood; why should the rear have been thus shut away from prying eyes?

His mind still busied with the problem, McCarty moved slowly about the study measuring with a practiced gaze the distance between the various articles of furniture until he came to the long, narrow table between the two davenports which flanked the hearth. Here he paused and taking the edge of the twisted strip of tapestry between his forefinger and thumb began almost mechanically to straighten it.

As he lifted it a gleam of something white against the age-darkened wood of the table top caught his eye and, thrusting the tapestry hastily aside, he disclosed a small, highly glazed oblong upon which were spots of red. It was a playing card, the nine of diamonds, but superimposed upon its regular scarlet lozengers were tiny blotches of dull crimson, unmistakable in their significance.

McCarty picked it up gingerly, and saw that it was torn half across its face; the crimson spots were fast turning a murky brown and a smudge which resembled the imprint of a finger was plainly discernible near one side. The card itself was of the most expensive grade of linen, gilt-edged, and despite its sinister stains had obviously come from a new deck. The back was of a peculiar design printed in rich colors and gold after the manner of the ancient illuminated text and McCarty studied it with minute care, fixing

the pattern in his mind. Then he crossed to the writing table between the windows and opening a drawer selected an envelope and placed the card within it.

This he slipped into his pocket and then began a close and exhaustive search of the room, albeit he shook his head dubiously as he did so. How that single blood-stained playing card happened to have been slipped under the edge of that strip of tapestry he could not fathom nor what its significance might be, but he felt certain that the rest of the deck would not be brought to light within those four walls. His supposition proved to be a correct one, for he found no playing cards or games of any description save a set of rare old ivory chessmen which he unearthed from a lower drawer of one of the bookcases. He took a final survey of the room and opened the door to return to the inspector, when just as he did so he beheld a dark, clerical appearing form noiselessly pass across the hall from the other side of the staircase.

It halted before the door of the breakfast room for an appreciable minute as though listening intently, then opened it and McCarty heard a deferential voice utter the conventional: "I beg pardon, sir!"

There was a murmur of indistinguishable words and the man passed within, closing the door behind him. In his turn, McCarty advanced to it and listened, and so it came that he heard the inspector's questions and learned the identity of the intruder. At the valet's refusal to state his whereabouts during the night McCarty quietly entered.

"Possibly not." The inspector's curt tones held a hint of menace. "Your preference, however, will not be consulted and I warn you that you had better be candid with us now."

"Perhaps," Mr. Alexander's thin, nervous tones broke in, "it would be best to wait until Mrs. Creveling arrives—?"

To McCarty's keen gaze it seemed that a glance of warning shot from the eyes of Creveling's late partner to the

valet, but the latter's demeanor did not change even as Inspector Druet turned wrathfully upon the author of the suggestion.

"I am conducting this inquiry, sir!" he thundered. Then to the man before him he added: "Your employer has been found dead, shot through the heart. Do you still persist in your refusal—?"

"Mr. Creveling dead!" The valet started back a step or two. "I—I overheard Mr. Alexander say something about 'murder' as I stopped at the door just now, but I didn't think—! This is horrible! Who—who shot him?"

He passed one hand across his lips as though to hide some uncontrollable evidence of emotion, but his eyes were fixed watchfully, unchangingly upon his interrogator.

"That is what we are endeavoring to ascertain," retorted the inspector. "Did you know of your employer's intention to come here to his house last night?"

"Yes, sir." The valet had hesitated for a shade of a second. "I was here earlier in the evening; it was I who received the caterer's men and arranged the table for supper."

McCarty smiled to himself. The man Hill was on the defensive and his very caution was proving his own undoing.

"Who was Mr. Creveling's guest?"

The curt question seemed to vibrate on the air like the echo of a single sharp note struck upon a gong and the face of George Alexander tensed visibly as he waited for its reply, but the valet merely shrugged.

"I do not know, sir."

"You did not remain, then, to wait upon the table?"

"No, sir. As I have said, I went to Mr. Creveling at his club."

"You did not return here?"

"Not until ten minutes ago." The valet's voice rang out firmly.

"When you saw Mr. Creveling at his club did he mention who was to be his guest here? Did he at any time say anything which would lead you to infer the identity of this person?"

"He did not, sir." Hill's tone was still firm, but for a moment his eyes shifted and then returned as inscrutable as ever to those of the inspector.

"Where have you been staying since Mr. Creveling has made his home at his club?"

"Here, sir." It was evident that the valet intended to render no assistance to the inquiry beyond the terse and literal replies demanded of him, but Inspector Druet persisted.

"You were acting as caretaker also?"

"No, sir. Two of the other servants—Rollins and his wife, the butler and cook—remained here for that; the rest of the staff except Mrs. Creveling's maid were dismissed when Mrs. Creveling went to the country and Mr. Creveling to his club."

The inspector exchanged a significant glance with McCarty, who still hovered quietly in the background.

"Mrs. Creveling usually left home for such protracted periods, and always dismissed practically her entire staff?"

Again there was that shade of hesitation and then the valet responded:

"No, sir. The staff was usually retained at half pay when it was intended to reopen the house again within a short time, but I understand that this season Mr. and Mrs. Creveling had made other plans."

"What other plans?"

Once more the valet shrugged.

"I cannot say, sir, except that some mention was made of traveling. I have received no instructions for the future; I feel sure, though, that I was not to be dismissed or Mr. Creveling would have said something to me about it."

"How long have you been in Mr. Creveling's employment?"

"For eleven years, sir."

Inspector Druet suddenly changed the tenor of his questioning.

"The butler and cook are not in the house. When did you see them here last?"

"Yesterday afternoon." Frank Hill shifted his weight from one foot to the other, the first sign of nervousness which he had displayed throughout the interview save his momentary shock at the intelligence of his master's death and the manner of it.

"They are not in the house now. Do you know where they have gone?"

"No, sir." There was no surprise in the valet's tone, but a sort of defiant reserve beneath the slightly ironic deference which obviously nettled the inspector.

"You knew, however, that they were to be absent last night? I want the story, Hill. No hedging!"

"Rollins, the butler, told me that Mr. Creveling had given him and his wife a holiday, but they were to be back early this morning, to prepare for Mrs. Creveling's homecoming."

"'Homecoming'?" repeated Inspector Druet sharply. "You said just now—"

"I beg pardon, sir." The quiet voice forestalled him. "I meant to say that the house was not to be reopened again with the staff this season. In a manner of speaking, it is never closed when the caretakers are here, and some one is always left in charge. I understood that Mrs. Creveling was to return this morning with her maid for a few days of preparation before starting upon her journey with Mr. Creveling. The butler and cook, Yvonne—the maid—and myself could, of course, have given sufficient service if no entertaining were contemplated."

The inspector meditated for a moment.

"Why did Mr. Creveling give the butler and cook a holiday yesterday, of all times, when he intended to receive some one here for supper last night?" he asked finally. "Supposing the meal were to be supplied from a caterer's, why did he not require the services of the butler to wait upon the table?"

As though he realized the slip he had made the valet's eyes sought those of Creveling's late partner, but Mr. Alexander avoided them studiously.

"I can't say, sir," Hill responded at length. "Mr. Creveling told me nothing beyond my own instructions."

"Was it usual for your employer during his wife's absence to clear all the servants out of the house in order to entertain here?"

At the question and its implication Hill's color changed, but his eyes once more met those of the inspector levelly.

"I do not know that Mr. Creveling ever did that, sir; I mean, purposely. He frequently had one or more gentlemen here to supper when Mrs. Creveling was away. Sometimes the butler waited upon them, sometimes I did. I think he gave Rollins and his wife a holiday before I asked permission to have the night to myself on this occasion."

Inspector Druet evaded the issue of the valet's own movements during the hours which had passed since eleven by asking:

"Did Mr. Creveling ever entertain ladies also on these occasions?"

"During Mrs. Creveling's absence?" There was a note of shocked incredulity in the servant's tones as if he could scarcely believe that he had understood the question. "Indeed, no, sir! They were strictly stag suppers."

"Who were the gentlemen Mr. Creveling entertained here, then?" the inspector continued. "What were their names?"

"Rollins can tell you that better than I can, sir," Hill

temporized. "He usually waited upon them, it was only occasionally that I took his place and then the gentlemen were sometimes strangers to me, business acquaintances of Mr. Creveling's."

"You don't know the name of a single gentleman who ever had supper here with Mr. Creveling alone?" The inspector's tone had sharpened again.

"Of course, sir, a few of them. They were all personal friends of long standing, those I did know; Mr. O'Rourke has been here once or twice, and Mr. Waverly and Mr. Cutter. I can't recall them all at the moment, sir."

McCarty, unable to contain himself longer, coughed with elaborate ostentation and after a quick side glance at him the inspector nodded.

"Mac, show this man where the body was found.—No, Mr. Alexander!" He added the last as the banker started forward nervously. "There are a few more questions I wish to ask you. Wait here, please."

Mr. Alexander sank back with an air of hopeless vexation.

"Then I trust that you will be brief!" he snapped. "I know nothing, as I told you in the beginning, which could help you in any way and this ghastly affair has been an inexpressible shock to me. When my niece arrives I must meet her with the news of her tragic bereavement and assume control of the situation as the head of the family and I cannot do so without an opportunity to pull myself together, to—to bear up under my own natural grief—!"

The door closed upon the thin, testy tones and the thought crossed McCarty's mind that the banker's emotion was somewhat tardy in finding expression, but his grimly determined face gave no indication of the idea as he piloted his charge to the study.

"'Twas there the body was found," McCarty explained as he pointed to the dark stain upon the rug, and then added with seeming irrelevance: "What did they do, Hill, at these

stag parties you were telling the inspector about? Play cards?"

Before McCarty's good-natured but keen scrutiny the valet seemed to have lost a trifle of the assurance which he had maintained in the presence of the inspector and now he blinked, staring as if fascinated at the sinister spot upon the floor.

"No. They just ate and drank and smoked."

"What did they talk about?"

The man Hill raised sullen, resentful eyes at the question.

"It was not my place to listen to the conversation," he responded tartly. "I served them when Rollins wasn't here to do it and minded my own business. That's all I know."

"You'll find you're minding your own business best now, my man, if you'll speak up and come clean!" McCarty admonished sternly. "You told the inspector in there that Mr. Creveling said never a word to you about last night beyond giving you your instructions; what were they?"

The valet moistened his thin lips.

"He told me that he was having a guest here for supper; that I was to be here at six when the caterer's men arrived and arrange everything and then bring him a bag of clean linen at the club at eleven."

"And when did he tell you this?" McCarty's eyes had narrowed.

"Yesterday morning."

"Where?"

"Here. He came for some papers before going down to his office, and gave me some other instructions about his clothes; he didn't like the valet service at the club."

"And what club was this where he was staying?" McCarty asked.

"The Marathon."

"Why didn't he stay in his own home if there were three of you here to look after him?"

The valet's shoulders and eyebrows lifted expressively.

"I never asked him and he didn't tell me, but I suppose he liked the club better than an empty house; any gentleman would." For the first time Hill looked squarely at his inquisitor. "Who are you? A detective?"

"I'm a special officer on this case and my name's McCarty," the ex-roundsman replied. "You'll be only saving yourself trouble—"

"'McCarty!'" Hill interrupted and there was something very like consternation in his tones. "You're the McCarty who was in all the papers in connection with the Hoyos case and the Glamorgan affair?"

"I am that!" There was no braggadocio in Timothy McCarty's plain, matter-of-fact statement. "Now, Hill, how long had you been in the house before you knocked at the door of the room where the inspector and Mr. Alexander were?"

"Only a minute or two, sir." The tone was almost eager now and the habitual servility had returned to it. "I let myself in at the tradesmen's entrance with my own key as usual and went upstairs to get a couple of hours' sleep before Rollins and his wife returned and it would be time to bustle about and get the house in order for Mrs. Creveling's coming. I started up the back way, of course, and at the second floor I thought I'd stop and see if Mr. Creveling was in his room; he usually slept home instead of going back to the club when he'd had any one here for a late supper, and when I found nobody there I supposed maybe his guest hadn't gone yet and I'd better come down and see if they wanted any more wine or anything. Mr. Creveling's private cellar is stocked up for two or three years yet to come. I went down the front staircase and heard voices in the room where I'd laid out the supper table, so I knocked."

"You thought Mr. Creveling was still in there?" McCarty queried blandly. "I mean, when you stopped and listened before you knocked?"

The valet shot him a startled glance.

"I didn't know what to think!" he blurted out after a moment's hesitation. "I heard Mr. Alexander's voice and recognized it, of course, but for all I knew he might have been the guest Mr. Creveling was entertaining. Then he said something about 'murder' and a strange voice answered. You know the rest, sir; I'm giving it to you straight!"

"You've been with Million-a-month Creveling for eleven years," McCarty remarked slowly, using the nickname with deliberate intent. "That's three years before his marriage. You may have come through with all you know about to-night's affair, Hill, but you've only done it because we dug it out of you. There's a lot more you know about the man you've been working for and I'm going to have it."

"There's been nothing since his marriage that all the world don't know, and precious little before that, thanks to the reporters that were forever barking at his heels because he was a free-handed spender and liked a good time!" the valet retorted. "I'm not saying Mr. Creveling was any angel in his younger days but there's nothing you can hang on him now."

"I disremember just now what all the scandal used to be about him but a look at the old newspaper files will give me a line on that." McCarty spoke as though to himself, but he watched the other narrowly. "'Twas the usual thing, I suppose: wine and women and horses and cards. The first of them at least he didn't give up when he married, by your own testimony, but how about the last? Has Creveling been gambling heavy lately, that you know of? Did he have any quiet little games here?"

Hill shook his head decisively.

"He hasn't touched a card in years, at least not that I've heard of. He never even sat in at Mrs. Creveling's bridge parties. After he married and settled down he started in antique collecting; not paintings so much but rugs and tapestries and porcelains and rare old books. Regular pas-

sion it got to be with him and he studied up on periods and such, but then he was always a natural judge of good things, Mr. Creveling was."

McCarty pondered for a moment. The other man's expression was as inscrutable as ever but there had seemed to be a thinly veiled double meaning in his last remark. Why had he been so obviously on the defensive since the beginning of the interrogation? He was shrewd and intelligent above the average of his class; surely he must realize the equivocal position in which he stood with the inspector after his open defiance and refusal to state where he had himself been during those crucial hours! McCarty tried another lead.

"This house has a kind of a new look to it, in spite of all the old things Creveling collected," he observed. "When was it built?"

"At the time of his marriage, sir; he built it for his bride. There's not a residence of its size on the Avenue to compare with it." The valet spoke with almost personal pride.

"And 'twas him put up that high blank wall at the back?" asked McCarty. "Why?"

"I never heard him say, sir. I suppose he preferred it to the back courts of the side street houses." The reserve deepened once more in Hill's tones. "It may have been Mrs. Creveling who suggested it; I cannot say."

"Did anybody ever die here before?" McCarty's own tones had lowered.

"Die?" The valet started nervously.

"In this house, I mean. Has there been a death here since it was built?"

"No, not until this!"

"That's funny. I never heard of a new house with never a death in it that sported a ghost before." McCarty seemed again to be reflecting aloud and for a moment there was silence while the other eyed him askance. At length he

resumed: "You used your own latch key in coming in a while ago; who else has keys to the house?"

"I don't know." The valet spoke in evident relief. "Rollins, of course, and his wife. The rest of the staff were supposed to turn theirs in to the housekeeper when they left, but they may have had duplicates made. The housekeeper went back to Scotland a month ago when the establishment was closed and Mrs. Creveling started visiting, but I don't know what became of the keys."

"I suppose you do know, though, what you're letting yourself in for by refusing to tell where you have been since eleven o'clock?" inquired McCarty. "You are the last so far as we know to have seen Creveling alive, you had a key to come and go as you please and you won't try to make out an alibi for yourself. It's liable to go hard with you."

"Maybe," Hill commented without bravado, but there was a peculiar glint in his swiftly lowered eyes. "If you're on this case, Mr. McCarty, it's for you and the inspector to prove that I was here after eleven, not for me to prove that I wasn't. I know American law, sir."

In spite of his respectful tone there was a covert challenge in it which McCarty grimly accepted.

"You've had reason to, maybe," he retorted significantly. "You've nothing more to add to what you've told the inspector and me?—Then we'll just go back—"

A heavy, dull thud sounding from the main hall broke into his sentence and with a common impulse both men turned to the door. McCarty reached it first and opening it stepped mechanically outside just as the inspector and Mr. Alexander issued from the breakfast room.

Across the rotunda, flooded with a mingling of pale sunshine and the more brazen electric lights, the four men beheld a figure which momentarily held them spellbound. A few steps from the main entrance doors which had just closed behind her a woman stood looking from one to another of them. Ash-blonde hair above deep violet eyes

peeped from beneath her motor hood and her tall, statuesque form, swathed in a long satin coat which revealed rather than concealed its splendid lines, was drawn up to its full height as she regarded them for a long minute in a silence which none of them seemed inclined to break.

At last her lips moved and with perfect self-possession she inquired slowly:

"What is it, please? What has happened to my husband?"

CHAPTER V

"WHO KILLED HIM?"

THE woman's tones were low and well-modulated but they seemed to soar to the topmost reaches of the galleried rotunda in the momentousness of their question and as they died away in a quivering silence even the matter-of-fact McCarty felt a cold shiver as of apprehension.

It seemed an age before George Alexander with a little nervous clearing of his throat advanced to meet her.

"My dear Myra!" There was mingled astonishment and dismay in his voice and beneath it McCarty detected that same undertone as of caution with which the banker had previously addressed the valet. "How could my telegram have reached you so quickly? I—we didn't expect—!"

"I know nothing of any telegram, Uncle George." Myra Creveling's voice still seemed strangely remote. "The cook telephoned out to me—at least I believe it was Sarah—that some accident had happened to Eugene. But who are these men?—Frank, where is Mr. Creveling?"

After a brief glance at the inspector and McCarty her eyes had fastened themselves upon the valet and as he opened his lips to reply the former stepped forward.

"You are Mrs. Creveling?"

"I am." Her glance returned to Inspector Druet. "May I ask who you are and what you are doing in my house?"

"Myra, my dear!" Alexander interposed hastily. "You must prepare yourself for a great shock, a great grief! This man is an inspector from the police department; Eugene was found here dead!"

For a moment her wide violet eyes stared deep into her uncle's and there came a sudden tensing of the lines of her beautiful face but no outcry, no faintness, no other signs of normal emotion. Then from her stiffened lips there issued one single question:

"Who killed him?"

McCarty glanced inadvertently at his superior. If the supposed maid had telephoned to her mistress merely that Creveling had met with some accident, why had his wife on learning that he was dead instantly assumed that he had been murdered?

Inspector Druet, however, did not take up that thread at once. Instead he gestured deprecatingly but with unmistakable authority to a throne chair which stood between two torch lamps near where she had halted and asked:

"At what hour did your cook telephone to you, Mrs. Creveling?"

Obediently, almost mechanically, the lady seated herself and loosening her cloak drew off her veil.

"At about five o'clock this morning, a trifle before the hour, I think." She put one hand to her forehead for a moment, but there was no dazed look of shock in the direct, clear gaze she bent upon her questioner.

"And that was all the message, that there had been an accident? You asked for no particulars?"

"I had no opportunity. That was all the message that was delivered to me. I did not receive it myself, the butler at Broadmead where I was staying replied to the telephone, then awakened my maid who in turn brought the news to me. I understood that the cook—the only maidservant left here—had said that I must come home at once, that something had happened to my husband."

At about five! That had been the hour when Alexander first made his appearance at the house, a few minutes after McCarty had concluded his solitary second search of the rooms upstairs. The agitated elderly gentleman had not

thought of sending the wire to his niece until a good half hour afterward; it must have been a quarter of six, at least, when the detective from borough headquarters reached the nearest telegraph office to despatch the message. Why had none of them thought to telephone direct to Broadmead instead?

As McCarty asked himself this question he glanced inadvertently at Alexander just in time to intercept a look which flashed between the banker and the valet; a deliberate motion of command with his eyes toward the room back of him which he had just left, the room with the disordered supper table still laid for two. McCarty's own eyes turned to Hill to find him slipping cat-like toward the door in a movement which the man himself instantly checked.

Mrs. Creveling's testimony was of utmost value at the moment, but McCarty made up his mind to keep his own attention upon this strangely assorted pair as well.

"You immediately aroused your host?" prompted the inspector.

"My hostess," Mrs. Creveling corrected him, still in that monotonous, remote tone without obvious display of repression. "Mr. Waverly was not at Broadmead last night.—Inspector, who killed my husband?"

Now indeed her voice had changed, but with no poignant outburst of pent-up grief. It rang out hard and cold and sharp as steel and behind it there was a stern, implacable determination to know the truth.

"What makes you think that any one killed him?" the inspector countered swiftly. "Your maid telephoned that an accident had occurred and your uncle here has merely informed you that Mr. Creveling was found dead."

She shrugged and a faint smile as of scorn curled her mobile lips for an instant before they settled again in that unyielding line.

"What fatal accident could have befallen him in his own home?" Her long, slim, white hands dismissed the pos-

sibility with a gesture of finality. "My husband was in perfect health and there can be no question of suicide. I demand to be told at once how he died."

"He was found in the study or library which opens just beside the staircase there, shot through the heart. The weapon, an army .44, was within reach of his hand and there was no living person in the house except those who discovered the body," Inspector Druet replied gravely. "Mrs. Creveling, when did you last see your husband alive?"

"Last Sunday. He came down to Broadmead over the week-end." She broke off and asked quickly: "Who found my husband? Was it Rollins or Sarah? Where are they?"

Frank Hill, the valet, interposed.

"Mr. Creveling himself gave them a holiday yesterday, Mrs. Creveling," he said.

She darted a swift glance at him and nodded slowly, but save for a slight tightening of her lips her expression did not change for a moment. Then a quick thought came to her.

"Then who—?"

Her uncle divined the question before it was uttered.

"We don't know. I was summoned, too, by telephone some little time before you were, but it was a man who called me, a stranger. I don't remember ever having heard his voice until early this morning." He spoke hastily, almost furtively. "Eugene entertained some one at supper here late last night, Myra, some client of ours probably—"

"Did you know that he intended doing so, Mrs. Creveling?" interrupted the inspector brusquely. "Do you know who the person was?"

She shook her head.

"No," she responded composedly. "I only know that if my husband was shot he was murdered. I do not wish to act in opposition to the authorities, but it is permitted I believe that in a case like this I may engage private investigators to coöperate with them?"

The inspector bowed but George Alexander started forward.

"Myra! Such a step would be most—most unnecessary! I am sure that the authorities are perfectly capable of handling this terrible situation and that they know best. I myself thought at first that it could not have been a case of suicide, but the pistol lay within touch of his fingers. I—I saw it myself! If you drag in blundering private detectives you will subject us to needless and distressing notoriety. This shock has dazed you, you are not quite yourself, my dear. If you will take time to think the matter over—"

"I have thought." Mrs. Creveling favored her uncle with a long inscrutable look and before it he seemed all at once to shrivel and the lines of age which grooming and care had kept smooth stood out in his pallid face. "I knew Eugene better than any one in the world and I know that the suggestion of suicide is absolutely untenable. I'm going to find out who killed him, Uncle George, if I move heaven and earth to do so. I have heard of a man, a scientific criminologist I believe he is called, who is quite famous in his way. I want him if he is to be had. His name is Wade Terhune."

A swift glance passed between the inspector and McCarty and the former shrugged with a slight smile. McCarty grinned in answer. So once more Terhune with his little scientific recording instruments and trained analytical mind was to be pitted against the routine methods of the force and McCarty's own efforts! It seemed a stroke of fate that the ex-roundsman, the inspector and the crime savant should be again upon the trail and the former looked forward with grim humor to Terhune's appearance on the scene.

"Mr. Terhune has often been called in by the department, and my special deputy, here, and I have worked personally with him on more than one case." Inspector Druet turned to Mrs. Creveling who still preserved her stoic calm.

"I have the telephone number here of his private, unlisted wire; shall I have him summoned for you?"

"Myra!" Mr. Alexander put in a final, futile remonstrance. "Think well what you are doing! If Eugene were really—er—murdered I am sure the inspector is fully capable of finding the guilty man. These private detectives are always looking for press notices and the notoriety will be hideous! Do you realize—?"

"I realize everything, Uncle George, and my mind is made up," Mrs. Creveling replied with a quiet finality of tone which brooked no further opposition. "I do not imply that the police department is incapable of handling this—this crime, but I want to feel that I myself am leaving no stone unturned to discover by whose hand my husband came to his death. If the inspector will give you his number I wish you would go and call up Mr. Terhune yourself for me. Tell him to name his own price, anything, but to come at once."

When Mr. Alexander, accompanied by the inspector, had retired to the study upon his reluctantly assumed mission McCarty stepped forward with one eye still on the valet and coughed deferentially.

"I'm the special deputy Inspector Druet put on this case with himself, ma'am. McCarty's my name. Is there any one else you want sent for? Any relative or friend, I mean?"

Once more Mrs. Creveling shook her head.

"Neither Mr. Creveling nor I have any relative beside my uncle, Mr. Alexander," she responded. "My maid will follow on the next train from Long Island and the butler and cook will probably return at any moment now as I was expected home this morning in any event. I do not want my friends about me, I want to be alone, to think."

To think but not to grieve. One look at that stern countenance, as immobile as that of some goddess carved in marble, would have shown to far less astute eyes than Mc-

Carty's that Myra Creveling would permit no breakdown, no unleashing of her emotions until her dominating purpose was achieved. That she had jumped so hastily to the conclusion her husband had been murdered pointed to the probability that she also strongly suspected the identity of the murderer but it would be futile to question her on that score at the moment.

"Of course that's only natural, ma'am." McCarty spoke soothingly. "Still I'm sure you'll be wanting to give us all the help you can and every minute counts now. In a case like this where we've got practically no clew and nothing to go on we'll have to find out what we can from Mr. Creveling's friends. I believe you said that Mr. Waverly was not at Broadmead last night. Were any other of your friends there? Mr. Alexander mentioned a Mr. and Mrs. O'Rourke, a lady named Culp or Kip—"

"Oh, they are in our set, of course, but none of them were at Broadmead," Mrs. Creveling interrupted. "There was no house party; I was just visiting there quietly for a few days."

"Where was Mr. Waverly last night? Was he expected out at his home?"

"No, he was at one of his clubs, I suppose. He telephoned out before dinner that he would be detained in town overnight. Mrs. Waverly and I were alone at Broadmead with the servants." She paused and then spoke in a quickened tone. "Mr. McCarty, you said just now that you had no clews. If my butler and cook have been away since yesterday, who was the man who summoned my uncle and the woman who telephoned to me? If those calls could be traced I should think you would have a very real clew to material witnesses, at least."

McCarty nodded gravely.

"We may be able to learn their identity, though 'twill be no easy matter; they might have 'phoned from pay stations, you know, ma'am. 'Tis unlikely that either of them

was the murderer, if murder was done. Mr. Alexander must have been called up after four o'clock and you say the message came to you a little before five. Now, Mr. Creveling's body was discovered a few minutes past two and according to the opinion of the medical examiner he must have been dead an hour before that; plenty of time, you see, for the murderer to have got clean away. Does the Waverlys' butler know your cook?"

"It is possible; I'm sure I don't know." There was a touch of hauteur in her tone.

"I was only wondering whether he recognized her voice or whether the woman told him who she was," McCarty explained mildly. "Do you know a Mr. Cutter?"

The slender, white hands resting on the arms of her chair gripped tensely at the sudden question, but she replied without hesitation or surprise.

"Nicholas Cutter? Certainly. He is one of our closest friends."

"And the O'Rourkes and Fords and the lady named Culp or Kip?" McCarty persisted. "Will you give me their full names and addresses, please? Are they all in the same set?"

"They are all in my immediate circle of friends, if that is what you mean." As if suddenly conscious of those betraying hands she lifted them and let them fall idly into her lap. "Of course, Mr. Creveling had many casual friends of whom I know nothing, clubmen and business associates, but those you mention have been our social intimates for years. Mr. and Mrs. Lonsdale Ford live at the St. Maur apartments on Madison Avenue; Mrs. Baillie Kip, if that is who you mean, has a house on East Sixty-third Street, and Mr. and Mrs. John Cavanaugh O'Rourke have taken the Hartington residence a few blocks above us on the Avenue, here. The Waverlys' town house is two blocks south."

McCarty had scarcely heard the last sentence. His face flushed and with shining eyes he repeated:

"John Cavanaugh O'Rourke! Would you know, Mrs. Creveling, if he came from the old country, from near Dublin?"

"Yes. He and his wife both came from there about six years ago. She was Lady Margaret Sinclair." The even voice responded without show of interest.

"Little Lady Peggy!" McCarty murmured softly to himself. "She and the son of 'the' O'Rourke! To think of it! The years do be sliding along fast!"

He was apparently absorbed, although the light in his eyes had suddenly misted, in jotting down the addresses on the back of an old envelope and as he replaced it in his pocket he looked up with a return of his deferential yet businesslike air.

"Your housekeeper has gone back to Scotland, I understand. Did she leave all the keys of the house with you, ma'am? Did the servants who were dismissed turn theirs in?"

"I suppose so. At least, Mrs. Jarvie gave me a small box filled with keys all labeled. I can show them to you later." Mrs. Creveling rose as her uncle reëntered from the study accompanied by the inspector. "Did you reach Mr. Terhune, Uncle George? Will he undertake the case for me?"

"He will be here as soon as his car can bring him," Mr. Alexander replied. "I fancy my call got him out of his bed, however, for it isn't quite eight o'clock yet and it will take him a short time at least to dress. If you wish to retire in the meantime to your own rooms and compose yourself for your interview with him I am sure that Inspector Druet will have no objection. We must not put too great a strain upon you after this fearful shock."

"There is just one more question I should like to ask Mrs. Creveling now." The inspector stepped forward hastily. "Had your husband any cause to fear for his life? To your knowledge had he any enemies, Mrs. Creveling?"

McCarty did not hear the lady's reply. The tail of his eye which had never left the valet's spare, black-clad form caught him slinking toward a door on the other side of the staircase and as the man disappeared within it he was close upon the other's heels. Hill moved swiftly with his accustomed noiseless tread and so intent upon his errand was he that he did not hear the careful but heavier steps behind him. The door led into a rear hallway and the two proceeded beyond the back stairs and around a turning past the pantries and kitchen toward the tradesmen's entrance.

A tall, angular, middle-aged woman was advancing along the hall, and behind her appeared the shorter, more rotund figure of a man evidently some years her senior. Both were dressed in the simplest of outdoor attire and their bearing betrayed their identity even before the woman spoke.

"Don't you remind us that we're late, Frank!" she said sharply. "We've had a dreadful night; fire in the flat below Rollins' sister's, and never a wink of sleep for any of us! I'm sure I wish Mr. Creveling would have his parties somewhere else and leave us in peace—!"

She stopped abruptly on catching sight of the stranger behind the valet and her close-set eyes seemed boring him through like gimlets. Before Hill could interpose the fat elderly man spoke over her shoulder.

"Lizzie couldn't 'elp the fire but Sarah will have 'er—'Ullo! Who's this?"

Hill darted a swift glance behind and for the first time McCarty caught a glimpse of the man's countenance with the mask off. It was drawn and distorted and a gleam of incalculable cunning shone from the narrowed eyes. The next instant with a twisted smile he had stepped aside.

"Perhaps you'd like to tell them yourself, sir." He waved his hand toward the newcomers. "It's Rollins and Sarah."

The two stood rooted to the spot as McCarty stepped forward.

"Police Headquarters," he announced bluntly. "You are Sarah Rollins, the cook here? Did you telephone out to Broadmead where Mrs. Creveling is staying during last night?"

"Police!" the woman gasped in a shrill whisper. "Whatever's been goin' on!—What would I telephone to Mrs. Creveling for? I'm one that minds my own business and makes no trouble!"

Unfeigned astonishment was blazoned upon her thin, acidulous face but no sign of apprehension, and satisfied that he had been answered McCarty turned to her husband.

"You're the butler? Did you telephone to Mr. George Alexander about half-past four this morning?"

"'Mr. Alexander!'" Rollins repeated in evident stupefaction. "At 'alf after four I was trying to settle to a bit of sleep again in my bed at my sister's. The house she lives in took on fire at two, and we were all routed out in our—as we were, sir. I 'ad no occasion to telephone to Mr. Alexander or any one else. What is it? What's been going on 'ere, robbery?"

"Mr. Creveling was shot to death here in his study sometime during the night." McCarty watched the effect of his words narrowly. "Do you know who was supposed to have had supper here with him?"

"Shot!" It was the cook who uttered the exclamation and her husband turned on her before she could continue.

"We know nothing about it!" His ruddy face had paled and the assertion although seemingly addressed to McCarty was as obviously intended for the woman. "This is terrible business, sir! 'Ow—'ow did it 'appen?"

"That's what I'm here to find out," McCarty retorted grimly. "Did you know why Mr. Creveling gave you a little holiday yesterday?"

"Why, yes, sir," the butler stammered. "I'd asked 'im

for leave to run up to Boston overnight sometime this week to see my brother-in-law on business, and yesterday Mr. Creveling told me to go last night and take Sarah with me if I liked; I understood that Frank would be 'ere to look after the 'ouse."

"Why didn't you go to Boston, then?" demanded McCarty quickly.

"Because my brother-in-law 'ad returned to the city. I 'phoned my sister to tell 'er we were going and she said 'e 'ad come home; that's why we went to 'er flat 'ere instead."

"And stayed overnight instead of coming back here to your own rooms to sleep?" There was contemptuous incredulity in McCarty's tones. "Why did you do that?"

"Because we talked late and my brother-in-law and I split a bottle that he'd got 'old of somewhere." Rollins spoke sullenly and then as if in afterthought roused himself to what was probably expected of him. "Mr. Creveling dead! This is 'orrible, sir, 'orrible! A fine, free-handed gentleman he was. Did a burglar break in, do you think?"

"I'm asking questions, not answering them," McCarty asseverated sternly. "If you're not more frank with me than this fellow here has been it's likely to go as hard with you as it will with him! Who had supper with Mr. Creveling here last night?"

"I don't know, sir, strike me pink! No more does Sarah. We're paid to do our work and keep our place and we've done both, as Mr. Creveling 'imself would tell you if 'e was alive to do it. Mr. Creveling has entertained gentlemen 'ere now and again but we didn't know he expected any one last night. Has Mrs. Creveling been sent for, sir?"

"She is here."

"Here!" Sarah threw up her hands. "And her rooms not in order, and me with all that lobster and stuff from the caterer's to clean up!—Let me pass! Police or no, I've got my work to do. I don't know anything about what happened to poor Mr. Creveling, and you needn't be afraid

I'll run away. You'll find me here when you want me!"

McCarty opened his lips as if to speak, then thought better of it and obediently stepped aside, but he gazed after the woman's departing figure with a quizzical look in his twinkling eyes. When she had disappeared he turned once more to the butler.

"How long have you and your wife been employed here?"

"Three years," Rollins replied. "I've never worked for a nicer family—in America, that is. Always extra 'elp when they entertained and I could 'ave 'ad a second footman any time I'd wanted to ask for one. This will be a bad job for us, getting mixed up in scandal at our time of life, and we've always been so particular about our positions too!"

"Where does this sister of yours live, Rollins?" McCarty cut short the flow of lamentation.

"Just across the park, sir, in West Ninety-fourth Street, a door or two from Columbus Avenue. I'll write the address down for you." The butler's hands fumbled shakily in his pockets. "Her name is Mrs. William Carroll and she can tell you that both Sarah and me were with her all night."

McCarty smiled to himself. He would have surer proof than that, for the engine and hose company which his particular crony, Dennis Riordan, adorned with his presence was located in the same precinct; Denny would have the best of reasons for knowing if there had been a fire at two that morning.

"'Tis just a matter of form," McCarty remarked. "Now, Rollins, come clean! That stuff about keeping your place is all right but you are in a position to know the truth and I want it. You've heard all the family conversation at table whether you wanted to listen or not; did you ever hear Mr. Creveling speak of any one he hated or who hated him? Was there any one who would be glad to get him out of the way?"

Hill had followed the cook kitchenwards and Rollins' gaze traveled past his questioner to the shadowed turn in the hall and he hesitated. Finally he spoke.

"Both Mr. and Mrs. Creveling was too 'ighly bred to discuss their affairs before any of the 'ousehold, sir. 'E was a very forceful man and I've no doubt made enemies but none that could 'ave wished 'im out of the way, though there was one that 'e had 'igh words with one night not a fortnight ago."

"Who was that?" McCarty demanded. "One of his intimate friends?"

The butler nodded.

"It was Mr. Douglas Waverly, sir," he said.

CHAPTER VI

THE CIGARETTE CASE

“WELL, well! So we have our friend and confrère Mr. McCarty with us once more! Are you going to lend us your valuable assistance in this case?”

A tall, spare, slightly bald, slightly stoop-shouldered figure detached himself from the group about the throne chair as McCarty made his reappearance in the reception hall and advanced a step or two with outstretched hand. There was amused condescension in his alert, self-confident manner and a hint of sarcasm in the crisp tones which made the honest face of the ex-roundsman flush, but he responded quietly as he shook hands:

“Inspector Druet has taken me on as special deputy, Mr. Terhune. I happened to be on hand when the body was discovered.”

“As usual, eh?” The noted criminologist smiled a trifle wryly. “Really, if the word had not been so much abused I should call you an opportunist, my dear McCarty! I have accepted Mrs. Creveling’s commission to investigate the affair in her behalf and I presume that we can count on your coöperation? If you were here when the crime was first discovered perhaps you will be good enough to give me the details; I have learned nothing as yet except that Mr. Creveling was found shot in the breast and my client refuses to entertain the theory of suicide.”

McCarty complied willingly enough but with certain reservations. He led Wade Terhune first to the study and described the finding of the body and the episode of the

burglar but made no mention of the blood-stained playing card, nor of the result of his second search of the rooms upstairs. It would be time to impart that information to the private detective when he had first laid the facts before his chief.

In the breakfast room they came upon Rollins hastily removing the débris of the supper which had ended so tragically and as Terhune paused to question him McCarty slipped away and rejoining the group in the hall led Inspector Druet aside.

"The cook and the butler are back, sir, and I think if you don't need me for a while I'll be getting on; there are a few things I want to look into. You'll be holding that valet, Frank Hill?"

"Of course, until he gives us some sort of an alibi that we can establish; he's our one best bet now unless you've got some dope you haven't told me about." The inspector glanced at him shrewdly.

McCarty's eyes twinkled.

"I've had no time, sir, and besides I've nothing definite as yet, but if you'll be going back downtown soon I'll come in and make my report.—When you frisk this man Hill at Headquarters if you find a pair of gloves on him keep them aside till I get there."

"Gloves on a warm spring night!" The inspector's own eyes narrowed. "For a valet he must be some classy dresser! There were none on him when he came to the door of the breakfast room."

"You'll find them in one of his pockets, most likely," McCarty remarked carelessly. "See you later, chief."

As he turned to go the telephone in the study shrilled in subdued insistence and Rollins appeared in the door of the breakfast room, but at a sign from the inspector McCarty was before him.

Crossing the study, he lifted the bronze ornament from the telephone and held the receiver to his ear.

"Hello! Can I speak to Mrs. Creveling, please?" It was a man's voice cultured in its intonations and yet with a note of inherent grossness.

"Who is it, sir?" McCarty asked cautiously.

"Mr. Douglas Waverly."

McCarty pondered for a moment and then spoke with his voice carefully modulated.

"Mrs. Creveling is indisposed. Can I take a message, sir?"

"This isn't Rollins talking! Is he there or Frank? My wife just telephoned to me that some sort of an accident had happened to Mr. Creveling, and I want to know if there is anything that I can do. Please convey that message to Mrs. Creveling."

"Very good, sir." McCarty waited for a brief space and then spoke into the mouth piece once more. "Mrs. Creveling is sending me down in person with a message, sir. It is most important and she doesn't want any one here just now. Where can I find you?"

"At the Belterre Hotel." The reply came after a moment of evident hesitation. "I'll expect you in about half an hour. Who the devil are you, anyway? What happened to Mr. Creveling?"

"I'll tell you, sir, when I come."

McCarty hung up the receiver and, returning to the hall, made his way out by the tradesmen's entrance. It was still too early for much traffic but a huge green 'bus like some monstrous beetle came lumbering past in the bright glare of sunlight and as McCarty swung himself aboard he glanced back at the house which he had just left. The lower windows were shrouded and blank but at one of the upper ones he caught a glimpse of a woman's white face staring down at him. As she caught his eye she withdrew hastily and the curtains were drawn together.

Who could she have been? He had left Mrs. Creveling still seated in the throne chair in the hall and he was cer-

tain that the face he had seen was a rounder, more youthful one than the thin, acidulous countenance of the cook. Had some woman remained concealed in that house despite the rigorous search of the men from borough headquarters?

He felt an impulse to descend from the 'bus and return to investigate, but a second thought restrained him; Mr. Douglas Waverly had named a half an hour later for their interview and he had stated with evident reluctance that he was at the Belterre Hotel. McCarty had a theory of his own as to that and he must reach his destination as quickly as possible in order to put it to the test.

On alighting from the 'bus he entered the lobby of the hotel but instead of approaching the desk to announce himself he strolled to the news-stand, purchased a paper and dropped into a chair by the less conspicuous side entrance of the huge hostelry. The lobby was astir with early risen patrons departing upon the business of the day, but few people entered from the street and these McCarty regarded with swift appraisal from behind the screening folds of his newspaper.

At length a taxi grounded against the curb and a stout man alighted carrying a small bag which he impatiently refused to deliver into the hands of the porter. McCarty eyed him as he strode past and over to the desk where he leaned across the counter and spoke to the clerk in a hurried undertone. At the latter's shake of the head the newcomer scrawled his name hastily in the register and, turning, followed a bell-boy to the elevator.

He was apparently about forty and the small, light blue eyes set in his smooth red face reminded McCarty somewhat irrelevantly of those of a pig. The latter waited for a few minutes and then, rising, tossed his paper aside and walked over to the desk. Two more arrivals had made their appearance and registered in the interim, but above theirs the hastily written signature of the fat man stood out boldly

and McCarty smiled to himself. His theory had proved to be a correct one.

"Will you be sending word to Mr. Douglas Waverly that the man he expects is here?" he requested.

The dapper young man behind the counter raised his eyebrows.

"What name?" he snapped.

"I didn't say." McCarty smiled blandly at him. "You'll be sending the message as I gave it, please."

His tone was quiet but there was a ring of authority in it that the clerk recognized and with a shrug he turned to the girl at the switchboard.

"You can go right up." He returned to the counter once more. "Suite eleven-four."

McCarty alighted from the elevator at the eleventh floor and knocked at the door of apartment number four.

"Come in." It was unmistakably the same voice which had talked to him over the wire at the Creveling house.

McCarty obeyed and his eyes twinkled anew as he glanced about him. The room was in disorder with clothing and newspapers scattered about and through the connecting doorway he could see the bed with its covers thrown back over the foot and its pillows rumpled. Before him the stout, red-faced man stood attired in bathrobe and slippers.

"You're from Mrs. Creveling?" the latter demanded.

"I've come straight from her house, Mr. Waverly, though it's questions I've brought, not a message." McCarty's manner was respectful but the twinkle had died out of his eyes. "If you'll answer me straight I'll not be keeping you long, sir, from the sleep you must be needing."

"Who are you?" Mr. Waverly turned a shade more red. "What do you mean about my needing sleep? I don't believe you have come from Mrs. Creveling at all, you are an impostor—I"

"They don't call me that down at Police Headquarters, Mr. Waverly," McCarty interrupted, still quietly. "You

only reached the hotel ten minutes ago, the ink is hardly dry on your name in the register and finding you ready for bed like this I thought you must need some sleep."

"Police Headquarters!" The ruddy face paled. "That fool clerk downstairs said that no one had called for me—"

"And no more they had, sir. I've been waiting down in the lobby some little time for you to come in; I knew you were never here when you telephoned." McCarty paused and then asked sharply: "Mr. Waverly, when did you last see Mr. Eugene Creveling?"

"Why, the night before last, Tuesday," the other stammered. "What's all the row about? Has he disappeared? My wife said something about an accident, but if it is just that he hasn't turned up—"

"He's turned up all right, sir; turned up his toes on the floor of his study, shot through the heart!" McCarty watched the effect of his announcement carefully.

"'Gene Creveling! Good God, it's impossible!" Waverly's flabby jowls took on a purplish tinge and his pale blue eyes seemed to protrude from their sockets. "You don't mean murder!"

"Looks like it, sir. The last time you saw him alive was on Tuesday night? Where was this?"

"At Nick Cutter's." Waverly raised a thick, pudgy hand to the folds of flesh which hung pendulous over his throat as though the collar of his bathrobe had suddenly grown too tight. "God! Creveling dead!—I suppose you're a detective but why have you come to me?"

"To get the particulars of how you learned of the supposed 'accident,' sir." McCarty's smile was disarmingly candid. "You say your wife telephoned to you; where did she get you on the wire?"

"She didn't; I telephoned to her," Waverly disclaimed, ignoring the question. "I wanted her to bring Mrs. Creveling and motor in to town for lunch, meant to dig up Creveling, too, and drag him back to the country this afternoon.

Mrs. Waverly told me that a message had come between half-past four and five o'clock this morning from Mrs. Creveling's cook, summoning her immediately to town, that Mr. Creveling had met with some accident. They're intimate friends of ours and naturally I called up Mrs. Creveling at once to learn what had happened and to offer my services. I never thought of anything like this! I can't believe it even yet. My God, it's horrible! Who—who could have done it?"

He sank into a chair and reached shakily for the fresh pitcher of ice water upon the table at his elbow. McCarty waited until he had drunk deep and then as the pitcher clattered back upon the table once more he observed:

"So the Crevelings are intimate friends of yours, sir? How long have you known them?"

"Look here, what are you driving at! Creveling and I palled around together for years before he was married and he was a frequent visitor at our house. Naturally when he became engaged my wife met Miss Alexander and since their marriage they have been closely identified with our immediate circle. My wife and Mrs. Creveling are almost inseparable."

"And you and Mr. Creveling, sir? Have you been getting on together lately as well as you used to?" McCarty's tone was ingratiating. "You'll excuse me, Mr. Waverly, but didn't you and he have a quarrel not so long ago?"

"'Quarrel'?" the other repeated, straightening himself suddenly in his chair as though to meet an unexpected thrust. "Great heavens, no! Who told you such a lie?"

"You didn't have a dispute with Mr. Creveling in his own house one night not a fortnight ago?" McCarty persisted. "I don't like to make mention of a lady—"

"By God, you'd better not!" Waverly rose from his chair with a threatening scowl. "I've stood about all of this that I'm going to, my man! I don't know where you've got your lying information nor by what authority you come

here to try to put me through a third degree but I'll listen to no more. Get out before I 'phone the office and have you put out!"

"I wouldn't try it, sir, if I were you," McCarty said blandly. "I'd have to ask you to take a little ride downtown with me and the head house detective here and tell the inspector in charge of the case what it was you and Mr. Creveling almost came to blows about after that little supper week before last. I thought you'd rather keep out of the notoriety and all; that's why I came to you quiet like."

"So that's it!" Waverly's lip curled. "Graft, eh? Blackm—!"

"Don't go too far, sir!" McCarty's tone was ominously quiet and there was a glint of steel in his eyes. "It'll do you no good to be calling names. I've got proof that two weeks ago come to-morrow night you had supper alone with Mr. Creveling in his house and high words passed between you over a lady; I've a witness who can testify as to that. I'm not one to work up sensations for the press to spring on the public and drag people that's maybe innocent into notoriety and scandal; 'twas for that I came here to you, man to man."

"Did your witness tell you the name of the lady who was supposed to have been discussed on that occasion?" Waverly sneered.

"If that's the way you care to put it, yes, sir," responded McCarty. "There were two ladies talked of, for the matter of that, but only one mentioned by name. You left the house in a rage, I understand, yet Mrs. Creveling stayed on as a guest at your country place and Creveling himself spent the last week-end there."

"That ought to be proof enough to you that there was no trouble between us." Waverly's tone had become all at once eager and conciliatory. "Sorry I misunderstood your motive in coming here. I'm quite willing to tell you all about that little argument with 'Gene Creveling for

I can see that it has been grossly exaggerated to you. I don't know who your witness is but I presume it is that rascally butler Rollins; I warned Creveling to sack him long ago. I did not leave the house in a rage as you have been told, but in sheer disgust. If Creveling is dead I'm damned sorry, but there's no use blinking the facts; his course of conduct hasn't been exactly straight and narrow and although we are none of us angels I took it upon myself as an old and intimate friend to remonstrate with him and he didn't accept it in the right spirit. That's all there was to it; it was all forgotten the next day."

"And since then you've been on friendly terms with him, Mr. Waverly?"

"Absolutely."

"Your mutual friends can vouch for that, I suppose? 'Tis not that I doubt your word, sir, but the inspector may want to check up my report." McCarty paused and added: "We know approximately the hour at which Mr. Creveling came to his death and if you'll tell me where you were last night from eleven o'clock on, it'll put an end to all annoyance for you."

"And if I don't choose to do so?" The flabby face had darkened again truculently.

McCarty shrugged.

"That's up to you, sir."

There was a pause and then Waverly spoke thickly.

"Have you the authority to keep it out of the papers? I mean, if I tell you where I was and prove it to you, can you keep it from reaching my wife's ears? Oh, there was nothing absolutely beyond the pale about it, but you know what women are!" he added hastily. "Can I count on you and your superiors to keep it quiet?"

"Well, sir, if your alibi's sound it's no concern of the Department what you have been doing," McCarty answered cautiously. "Of course, I can't guarantee that the reporters won't look you up, as having been intimate with Mr. Crevel-

ing, but it'll be on no information from us. You telephoned out to your country place late yesterday afternoon that you would be detained in town last night, Mrs. Creveling says."

"Y-yes." The light blue eyes were lowered and his full underlip protruded sullenly. "I met a man I know and he invited me to a supper party in his rooms; we whooped it up until after five this morning and when the crowd had broken up I turned in there for a few hours' rest. My host is a good fellow and all that but he's not quite the sort I'd take to my own home or introduce to my wife, and the party wasn't a stag affair. You understand? When I woke up I was disgusted with the aftermath and on an impulse I 'phoned out to Mrs. Waverly to ask her to run in to town for lunch, as I told you. She informed me of the message summoning Mrs. Creveling and I called up their house."

"This man who invited you to supper in his rooms; you met him before you 'phoned out to Long Island yesterday afternoon, Mr. Waverly?"

"Naturally. I gave Mrs. Waverly some trivial excuse; told her I had to attend a business conference with some out-of-town people here at the Belterre last evening and it might be a late session. I intimated that if it were I would take a room here for the night." He spoke with evident reluctance. "When I called her up this morning and she told me of the supposed accident I realized she would take it for granted that I was here and might try to get me later to find out what had happened to Creveling. That was why I told you I was stopping here and then hurried down to meet you."

"I see." McCarty nodded. "Who is the man that gave the party, Mr. Waverly? What is his name?"

The other hesitated and then replied in a lowered tone:

"Mr. Samuel J. Venner."

McCarty stared. Sam Venner bore a reputation that was far from savory even among the sporting element of

the city and his activities had more than once come under the scrutiny of the authorities on the lookout for new forms of confidence games. How could he possibly have wormed himself into even a nodding acquaintance with a man of Waverly's social standing?

"You fellows have heard of him, I imagine." Waverly shrugged in his turn. "He's quite a character around town but I don't believe you've ever had anything on him."

"I've heard of him," McCarty admitted briefly. "Did you spend the whole evening with him, Mr. Waverly? After you accepted his invitation and 'phoned out to your wife, what did you do?"

"I went up to my town house, climbed into some dinner clothes which I had left there and dropped in at the club." As if anticipating the inevitable question he expatiated: "The Cosmopolitan Club. It was dead as a door-nail, nobody there I cared to talk to and I drifted down to Sharp's Chophouse for a bite and then dropped in for the last act of 'The Girl from Paradise.'"

"All by yourself, Mr. Waverly? You were alone from the time you left your house?"

"Quite alone. I took a taxi directly from the theater up to Venner's apartment on Riverside Drive."

"Who else was in the party there?"

Again Waverly hesitated. He had been speaking more and more slowly as though choosing his words with care and now he raised his eyes half defiantly to those of McCarty.

"Isn't it enough for you if Venner corroborates my statement? There were other people present who would find themselves in just as awkward a position as I should be if the thing came out."

"The ladies or the gentlemen?" McCarty asked.

"'Ladies'?" Waverly leered. "They were show girls from the 'Bye-bye Baby' company. I imagine they wouldn't object to a little free press-agent stuff, though Venner—!"

He caught himself up sharply as though regretting the admission and rose.

"I've nothing more to tell you. You can find out from Venner himself whether or not I was in his rooms from a little before midnight until an hour ago, and as for that little row with Creveling—Lord! We've been having 'em for the last fifteen years or more over one thing or another. If he's been done in as you say, I'm inexpressibly shocked and grieved to hear it as the rest of our crowd will be, for he was the best of good fellows even if he did get out of bounds occasionally, but I know no more about his death than you do; not half as much, I fancy."

"Just what do you mean by 'out of bounds,' Mr. Waverly?" McCarty ignored the hint to go, and stood his ground firmly.

"If your informant gave you the gist of our conversation on the night of the supposed quarrel you ought to be able to figure that out for yourself." The thick lips parted in an unpleasant smile. "You can't expect a leopard to change his spots altogether, you know. Not that 'Gene wasn't genuinely fond of his wife, but he always had an eye for a pretty woman. I'd heard that he was going it a bit strong over a new case and for Mrs. Creveling's sake I thought I'd try to pull him up before it came to her ears. That's how her name was dragged into the discussion."

"And the lady in the case?"

"I can't tell you her name because I don't know it, but I wouldn't if I did!" Waverly snapped. "You fellows go too far! I'm willing to meet you half way, and I'm anxious to do all in my power, of course, to help you find out who shot Creveling but I'm damned if I would drag in the name of any woman, especially in the case of a mere indiscretion like this."

"How do you know it was a mere indiscretion?" McCarty demanded quickly.

"I knew Creveling." The reply was terse. "He'd have

every art dealer and collector of antiques searching for months for a certain Ming vase or ancient prayer rug and when he secured it he scarcely gave it a second glance. It was the same with beautiful women; he'd sit at their feet as long as they were indifferent, but if they gave the first sign of awakened interest—good night!"

"You are sure, then, that this affair hasn't reached the ears of his wife?"

"Of course it hasn't!" Waverly exclaimed hurriedly. "She has always believed in him implicitly; that's why I wanted him to call a halt now."

"Well, Mr. Waverly, I won't trouble you any further if you've no objections to my calling up Mr. Venner just as a matter of form and verifying your statement." McCarty moved tentatively toward the telephone set in the wall.

Waverly smiled again and waved toward the instrument.

"Go as far as you like," he invited magnanimously. "Venner's number is Hudson 4052."

McCarty repeated it into the 'phone and after a brief interval a deep voice growled at him over the wire:

"Hello! What is it?"

"I want to speak to Mr. Venner."

"You're talking to him now. Who are you?"

"Mr. Douglas Waverly told me that I could reach him at your rooms," McCarty said cautiously.

"Well, you can't," the voice responded. "He's gone; left about an hour ago."

"He was at that little party of yours last night?"

"Yes. Who the devil are you?"

McCarty hung up the receiver and turned to find Waverly still smiling derisively at him as he drew a cigarette from a diamond encrusted case and then proffered it.

"Smoke?" he suggested. "I hope you're satisfied now, my man. Of course I don't want to be hauled into the limelight of a murder case, but for Creveling's sake I'd be glad to help you if I could."

McCarty shook his head at the offer of the cigarette. An air of preoccupation seemed suddenly to have settled upon him and he replied absently :

"Yes, sir, I'm satisfied. Sorry to have troubled you, but in a case like this we've got to look into every stray bit of information that comes our way. Good morning, sir."

Once outside the door he made his way toward the elevator with a dazed sense of unreality. Could he have seen aright and if so was there any special significance in what he had beheld? There had been nine jewels in that flat oblong of gold, four down each side and one in the middle, each set in sharply defined diamond-shaped indentations, so that the cigarette case itself bore a startling resemblance to the Nine of Diamonds; startling to McCarty's mind at least because of that other Nine of Diamonds, torn and bloodstained, which he had found in the room where Eugene Creveling came to his death.

CHAPTER VII

THE SHADOW ON THE STAIRS

DENNIS RIORDAN, dragging a chair after him, emerged from the engine house of Company 023 and settled himself in the mild, balmy sunshine. Down the vista of the street lined by tall flats the trees of the park, their tops just burgeoning into feathery green, formed a delicate touch of color in the monotonous, faded brick and stone and the fireman's gray eyes rested upon them ruminatively as he reached for his pipe. Then his gaze shifted with lively expectancy and the hand groping for his pocket paused midway, for a familiar figure turned the corner and strode toward him.

"What's up, Mac?" he asked when the figure had approached within hearing distance. "I thought you were going down to Homevale to-day to evict that tenant of yours that's driving the neighbors crazy with his cornet practice. You look as though you'd been making a night of it!"

"I have." With the privilege of a constant visitor McCarty reached a long arm across the threshold, and, procuring another chair, placed it with its back tilted against the wall beside his friend. "When are you off duty the day?"

"Not till six." Dennis eyed the other with anxious solicitude. "How much did you lose?"

"Didn't I give up card-playing for Lent?" McCarty demanded reproachfully.

"You did, but well I know what that means as long as you can find a quiet little crap game to horn in on, or any one to flip the coins with you! 'Tis a crying shame, property or no, for a man in the prime of life to have nothing to do but gallivant around town looking for trouble and

many's the time I've cursed your uncle, God rest his soul, for leaving you the money that made you resign from the force!"

His manner was almost maternal and McCarty chuckled dryly.

"'Tis not always I have to be looking for trouble, Denny; sometimes it falls on me, like that girl from the window of the Glamorgan a couple of years ago."

There was that in his tone which made Dennis' chair come down on all four legs with a clatter on the sidewalk.

"What!" he exclaimed with avidity. "Is there something big on down at headquarters that the inspector has been after asking you to lend a hand on? There's been nothing in the papers barring hold-ups that would make Dick Turpin blush like an amateur—!"

"If there was you'd never know it; after you've satisfied yourself that the championship is still safe for democracy and the Giants aren't developing sleeping sickness the news of the day is finished for you," McCarty observed with fine scorn. "As for my resignation from the force I'll have you know that it's been temporarily handed back to me and that fellow out at Homevale can toot away till he's black in the face for all I care! I'm back on the job again."

"What is it, Mac?" Dennis' tone was sepulchral from suppressed excitement. "Why didn't you let me know? I was off last night—"

"I didn't know it myself till I nabbed a young second-story worker coming out of the window of one of those grand houses across the park quicker than ever he went in and learned what he'd found there. 'Twas the body of the owner, him they used to call 'Million-a-month' Creveling along Broadway, with a bullet in his heart and a .44 beside him."

McCarty detailed his nocturnal experience and Dennis listened with bated breath to the point where, while the search of the upper rooms by his crony and Inspector Druet

was progressing, the shadow had appeared behind them on the staircase. Then he could contain himself no longer.

"Holy mother!" he ejaculated. "Was it a ghost or the murderer himself, do you think, Mac?"

"Whoever it was, 'twas no ghost, Denny, as you'll see later," McCarty averred. "The drawers of the desk in the housekeeper's room were locked and when I lifted the end and shook it I could hear something heavy, like books, sliding around inside; I noticed too that the locks themselves were rusty. Mind that. There were no keys in the room though we looked everywhere, so the inspector and I beat it down to the study once more where Clancy was waiting with the dicks from borough headquarters. They all said they hadn't been back upstairs again and the inspector kidded me about hearing things but I couldn't get the thought of that shadow out of my mind and as soon as I could I slipped away and up to Creveling's room once more; the sound that I thought I'd heard when we were on the upper floor seemed to come from there.

"Everything looked just the same as when we had left it but when I went over to have a second look at the little drawer with the spring lock in the desk there were new marks on it overlaying those our fingers had made; whoever had followed us wore gloves, as you could see plain from the oil the desk had been rubbed up with. Ghosts don't wear gloves, Denny."

"Then who—?"

"I went over the same ground from room to room that I'd been through with the inspector only a few minutes before but I didn't find anything else till I came to the housekeeper's room again," McCarty continued, unheeding the interruption. "The locks on the desk there were shiny and dripping with fresh oil and when I lifted it, it was lighter and nothing slid around inside. Somebody had slipped up behind us and opened the drawers of both of the desks, taking out whatever was inside; somebody who

knew how to work that spring lock. I didn't find hide nor hair of him, though, and I'd upset and broke a bottle of perfumery in Mrs. Creveling's room, bad luck to it! When I got back down to the study Clancy sniffed it on me and I doubt that I've lost the smell of it yet!"

He went on, telling of the arrival of George Alexander, the valet, Hill, his own discovery of the bloodstained card thrust under the tapestry on the table and the return of Mrs. Creveling and finally the cook and butler.

"And all you've got to go on," Dennis summed up for him, "is the bit of amber mouth piece the other man had smoked with, the lone card and the marks of gloved fingers on the desk upstairs."

"Not quite. I'm asking myself a lot of questions, Denny, for there's more in a look sometimes or a chance word than in all the finger-prints in the world. For instance, what's there between that valet and Mrs. Creveling's uncle, George Alexander? They tried their best to slip away for a little confab together, but I kept my eye on them; there's something they both know and each of them was afraid that the other would let it out. Why did that valet Hill say he had just 'returned' and correct it to 'arrived'? If he had nothing to conceal either on his own account or on Creveling's why did I have to drag out of him the little I learned? Why wouldn't he tell where he'd been all night? When the inspector asked him if he knew Creveling was coming to his house last evening 'twas on the tip of his tongue to deny it when he remembered that he'd taken the things from the caterer's men himself for the supper and they'd say so if they were questioned. It's plain, of course, that Creveling got rid of all the servants for the night so that none of them should see who his company was but I've an idea that Hill knows, all the same."

"You don't think—" Dennis chose his words with evident care. "You don't think maybe it was a—a lady he had to supper and she shot him after in a fit of jealousy?"

"With a .44 that has a kick to it like an army mule?" McCarty snorted. "Inspector Druet asked Hill if Creveling ever entertained ladies in his home during his wife's absence and the valet said no, that they were strictly stag suppers, and he didn't seem any too anxious to give the names of any of the gentlemen who'd been present. He said they just ate and drank and smoked and chinned with never a little game to while away the hours; that Creveling hadn't touched a card in years."

"Then how did that Nine of Diamonds come to be there on the table?" demanded Dennis.

There was a pause and then McCarty replied slowly:

"I don't know, unless some way it was a part of the grim game that was played out to a finish between the two of them in the study after supper."

"A game of life and death, with Creveling losing the odd trick." Dennis nodded. "If you did not find the rest of the pack lying around, maybe the one card was brought by the man that killed him as a sign or a reminder.—Oh, you needn't be looking at me like that, Mac! Stranger things than that are going on behind those white marble fronts for all you know! But what was that high blank wall built for at the back?"

"That's one of the questions I've been asking myself, like I told you." McCarty cocked his ear at a newsboy's shrill call down the street and shook his head. "No. It'll be too early for the papers to get hold of it yet.—It's funny how they were all so sure, even his wife, that Creveling had been murdered, and him with the pistol lying beside him. It was only when Mrs. Creveling spoke of calling in Terhune that her uncle backslid and pretended that he thought it might have been suicide after all."

"Terhune!" Dennis exclaimed. "For the love of the saints, is he in on this, too?"

"With both feet, and I misdoubt a couple of his little scientific recording machines up his sleeve," McCarty

chuckled. "'Twould have done you more good than a drop of the best to have seen his face when I came back after talking to the cook and butler and found him in the hall!"

"So 'twas Mrs. Creveling called him in and her uncle didn't want him." Dennis was slowly digesting the facts. "Do you think this Alexander and the valet were in cahoots? It looks as though the both of them were trying to shield somebody, all right."

"I don't understand the attitude of the whole lot of them." McCarty shook his head once more. "From the minute Mrs. Creveling put her foot in the house there seemed to be a kind of a silent battle going on between her and her uncle; you could feel it in the air. He was trying to run the whole affair to suit himself and she defying him and getting her own way too, in the end.—Say, Denny, there was a fire in the neighborhood last night, wasn't there?"

Dennis stared.

"Sure, what night isn't there, with the people packed in flats like sardines in a box!—But what are you getting at, Mac?"

"When was the fire and where?"

"Along about two, on the next block," Dennis replied. "An upset kerosene stove started it in a dressmaker's place on the ground floor where she was working late and it spread to the basement before we could get it under control, but it didn't get upstairs though the tenants were pretty well smoked out. How did you know about it?"

"That's where the butler's sister, Mrs. Carroll, lives; where he and his wife spent the night." McCarty drew a cigar from his pocket and chewed the end ruminatively. "They're queer birds. The cook would have talked, I'm thinking, but her husband shut her up, though at that I caught them in one lie.—Before Sarah got sight of me standing behind Hill she said to him that she wished Mr.

Creveling would have his parties somewhere else and leave them in peace, but when I told them Creveling had been shot the butler denied that either of them knew he expected any one last night. In the next breath after Sarah learned that Mrs. Creveling had already come home she bewailed that the rooms were not in order and she had all the lobster and stuff from the caterer's to clean up. How did she know there'd been lobster for supper if she hadn't heard the order given? Of course, all this has nothing to do with the murder itself, but knowing so much it wouldn't surprise me if they knew or at least suspected who Creveling's guest was, the night."

"Then what are they all shielding him for? Blackmail?" Dennis' gray eyes snapped with interest. "From what you've told me of them, Mac, 'twould hardly be loyalty would keep them quiet; you'd think they each of them had a fish to fry, by the looks of it!"

McCarty darted a quick glance at his companion.

"True for you, Denny, and I'm wondering if maybe this fellow Hill isn't trying deliberately to draw our fire by refusing to tell where he spent the night, meaning to collect privately from somebody for creating the diversion. Rollins and Sarah are easy to handle but that valet is away above his job and he's been with Creveling since his bachelor days, probably knows more about him than any one else in the world. If we could only find the way to make him talk—"

"What about Mrs. Creveling?" interrupted Dennis suddenly. "From what you say, she took the news as cool as a cucumber. Now I don't pretend to know anything about the workings of a woman's mind, not being a damned fool, but it don't seem natural like for her not to scream nor faint nor raise some sort of a ruction."

"I don't know." McCarty held a match to his cigar and then flipped it into the gutter. "She's a determined woman and a strong one and she's got her own suspicions, all right, but she knows she can't prove anything by herself; that's

why she called in the biggest man in his line she ever heard of—Terhune. She'll waste no time keening the dead till she's caught the one that killed him, that is if there's any grief in her heart."

"If there isn't why should she be so anxious to get revenge on the murderer?" asked Dennis.

"Well, if there's one thing that's stronger than grief it's hate, Denny, and I'm thinking Mrs. Creveling for all her gentle ways would be a good hater. We got more than a hint from her uncle's testimony that there might have been a commercial angle to that marriage and every one but him is willing to admit that Creveling was no saint, neither before nor after, though her friends don't think she's been on to his philandering."

"Her friends'?" Dennis repeated.

"Sure. I had a little talk with one of them just now at the Belterre Hotel, the husband of the lady she's been staying with down on Long Island."

He described his interview with Douglas Waverly and the corroboration of his alibi over the telephone by Samuel Venner, and Dennis whistled.

"So that's the kind of a bird Creveling's been traveling with, is it? Fat and flashy and going to con. men's parties on the side! That crowd can't be the real thing in spite of their money, Mac, take it from me. What show was it you said the girls at the supper came from?"

"The 'Bye-bye Baby' company." McCarty glanced again at his companion. "Why? Is it show girls that's interesting you now, at your time of life?"

The sarcasm passed unnoticed over Dennis' hard head.

"It is not," he responded equably. "And as to my time of life I'll have you remember I'm younger than you by a year!"

"Eleven months," McCarty protested. "But what about the show?"

"Nothing, only Terry Burns's daughter is in it; Beatrice,

the little one. He was telling me only the other day that there was no holding her back. She calls herself 'Trixie' now and threw over Eddie Kirby that's well fixed in the ice business for what she speaks about as a 'career.' Terry's as fine a fellow as ever promoted a fight in Harlem and I'd hate to think of little Bea at a party like the one Venner gave."

"I mind Terry and the family, though 'tis years since I've seen any of them," McCarty observed meditatively. "If 'twas a daughter of mine—!"

"'Tis no daughter of either of us, thanks be!" Dennis ejaculated devoutly. "So you got nothing out of this Waverly except that there was another woman in the case with Creveling?"

"That, and a flash at his cigarette case." McCarty rose. "I'll be getting on down town now; I want to go home and clean up and see a couple of people before I report to the inspector."

"I'm off duty at six," Dennis announced wistfully. "If so be you want me—?"

"I'll give you a ring," McCarty promised. "Terhune and Inspector Druet and me being in this already we might as well make a quartette of it, like old times. Have you got a dress suit?"

Dennis eyed him askance.

"I have not, and never another will I hire after the one I rented for Molly's wedding! It might have been the stuff they used to clean it with, but then again it mightn't, and I'm taking no more chances—!"

"Never mind; I've none myself," McCarty said hurriedly. "You'll hear from me before six."

He strode off toward the modest bachelor quarters which he occupied over the antique shop of Monsieur Girard but upon reaching his own corner he halted abruptly. A newspaper was spread on the step leading up to the apartment entrance and upon it an exceedingly long-legged young man

was seated twirling his hat on the head of the cane between his hunched-up knees. His red head glowed brazenly in the sun and he looked up with a boyish grin as McCarty advanced reluctantly.

"Hello there, Mac! I thought you'd show up for a shave and a clean collar now that you're moving in society. If I had your luck in falling over news I'd be city editor by now. What's the good word in the Creveling case?"

"There's none," McCarty retorted promptly as Jimmie Ballard, most ubiquitous of reporters, prepared uninvited to ascend with him to his rooms. "Creveling was found dead with the gun beside him; that's the long and short of it. You'd better be seeing the inspector—"

"Not a chance in the world and you know it!" Jimmie laughed. "Come now, Mac, be a sport! We've got the obituary salted down at the shop, of course, but I've got to have a double column for the first edition of the afternoon rag. Usual stall at the house; Mrs. Creveling prostrated, couldn't see any one and had nothing to say for publication. All I know is that you and Officer Clancy nabbed a burglar creeping out of the house and investigating found Creveling's body. Of course, you're retired from the force, you've nothing to do with the investigation and you're only a private citizen drawn by your own curiosity into the case?"

"You've got me right, my lad." McCarty threw the butt of his cigar out into the middle of the street and turned to insert his latchkey into the door.

"Well then, you old fraud!" Jimmie made his point gleefully. "There's no reason why you can't give me your private opinion. Do you think that young crook shot Creveling?"

McCarty sighed and then his eyes twinkled with sudden inspiration.

"There's no getting away from you, Jimmie! Come on up if you want to; it's no good denying that I'm interested

in the case for all I'm a back number and my curiosity that you were talking about is still working. You started in as a society reporter, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh," Jimmie admitted with a grimace as they mounted the stairs. "I'd rather do the sob sister stuff any day.—But what about that gangster you caught crawling out of the window?"

"Is he a gangster?" McCarty asked cautiously.

"Surest thing you know; one of the Lexington Avenue Blackjacks, though he's only a kid. What little nerve he had is gone and he's bleating down at headquarters now that it was the first job he ever tackled and he only did it to prove to the rest of the gang that he was as good as any of them. He declares he found Creveling dead on the floor and that you can swear to it. How about it, Mac?"

"Well, there was no silencer on the gun we saw lying beside the body and the one I found on the crook when I frisked him was loaded to the full," McCarty replied slowly, weighing each word. "I saw the fellow just ahead of me on the Avenue skulking to the house and getting through the window and I waited outside for him, but I didn't hear any shot. Come till I shave, I've little time to spare, for I've got to catch the eleven-thirty train to Homevale, to evict one of my tenants."

Jimmie grinned again at the palpable mendacity but followed and perched himself on the foot of the bed where he could view the bathroom through the opened door.

"You're a busy little landlord, aren't you?" he jeered good-naturedly. "Did you see anything while you waited under the window?"

"Nothing but the legs of my young friend Bodansky coming out faster than ever he went in and I didn't have long to wait, either; not more than three minutes." McCarty paused to draw the razor along the line of his square jaw and then turned. "That obituary you've got set up will be

good reading if it goes back to the days when Creveling was known as 'Million-a-month' along Broadway."

"I was a cub then but I remember him and the crowd he trailed with," Jimmie remarked. "Didn't see much of him at society crushes until his engagement to Miss Alexander was rumored."

"She's a fine looking woman." McCarty turned again to his task. "Are they a grand family, the Alexanders?"

"Good blood in them; old stock but it's run to seed. The money went, too, during the past generation or so and old George Alexander helped it along with a lot of fool speculations. He must have been very nearly at the end of his rope when Creveling married his niece and put him on his feet again."

"What do you know about the set they've been going with?" McCarty spoke with studied carelessness. "The Waverlys, and Fords, and a man named Nicholas Cutter and this Mrs. Baillie Kip, of East Sixty-third Street? I can't recall all the names I heard mentioned in connection with them."

"You heard an earful," Jimmie assured him. "They're a pretty swift bunch but all well connected and there's never been any actual scandal about any of them. The Douglas Waverlys are all right financially though he's a rotter and like Creveling his wife comes of a far better family than he. If by the Fords you mean Lonsdale Ford and his wife, they're climbers; never heard of until a few years ago when he bought a seat on the Exchange. It is a mystery how they managed to get into that set, especially on a footing with Nicholas Cutter, for he's a dyed-in-the-wool aristocrat."

"What does he do for a living?" McCarty asked.

"Nothing, though he is an honorary director of half a dozen banking institutions. His father left him millions but he doesn't seem to care much for society beyond a

small circle of intimate friends, and he never entertains on a large scale though he could have the smartest people in town about him if he liked." Jimmie stood up and thrust his hands in his pockets. "See here, Mac, I'm no walking Blue Book! You've seen Mrs. Creveling; what did she say? How did she act? Had she been notified of her husband's death before she arrived?"

"Wait a bit," McCarty admonished. "You haven't told me about this Mrs. Kip yet. Who is she?"

Jimmie shrugged.

"Nobody knows. Widow of a Western mining man, I've heard. She blew into town about six or seven years ago, rented a big house and went in for charity; the old shortcut to social position, you know. It didn't work in her case and after vainly knocking at the portals for two or three seasons she dropped out of sight only to reappear last autumn in the Crevelings' set, but the Lord knows how she got there.—Now come across, Mac; give me the straight dope. You talked with old Alexander, or at least you must have been there when Inspector Druet questioned him, for the report says that he was the first of the family to appear on the scene after the discovery of the body."

McCarty complied and with certain mental reservations gave his young friend a sketchy account of what had taken place, omitting all reference to the mysterious telephone messages which had summoned George Alexander and Mrs. Creveling, as well as his own discoveries and conclusions. It satisfied Jimmie Ballard, however, and he crowed exultantly.

"Oh, boy! That'll be some scoop if I get down to the shop in time! Thanks, Mac, I'll do as much for you some day."

At the door McCarty halted him.

"One second, Jimmie. Every gang has a leader and I misdoubt but it's the same in society as down on the docks. Who was the head of the Creveling crowd? Himself?"

Jimmie Ballard shook his head.

"No. Usually a woman is the center of any social clique and Mrs. Creveling has been mentioned more often and more prominently than any of her immediate friends, but that is because of the position her family have held for so long. I think the real leader of their crowd is Nicholas Cutter."

CHAPTER VIII

FROM THE LONG AGO

MCCARTY completed his cleaning up process in rather an elaborate manner after the departure of Jimmie Ballard. Arraying himself in a new suit which had hung in his closet for more than two months awaiting an auspicious occasion for its display, he spent valuable and anxious moments over the selection of a necktie, which, while denoting prosperity by its evident costliness, should at the same time convey a suggestion of conservative dignity. That important decision made, he next debated with himself over the rival merits of a silk hat which he reserved, as a rule, for funerals, and a rakish fedora, but finally compromised on his habitual derby.

Tenderly polishing the gold-headed cane that the Amalgamated Brewers' Association had presented to his late uncle, he caught up a pair of shiny black kid gloves in which he had officiated as pall-bearer for that defunct gentleman, and, satisfied that his sartorial equipment left nothing to be desired, he left his rooms and started across the park.

For the moment the investigation into Eugene Creveling's death and its attendant mystery had faded from his mind. Instead it had reached back through the busy, hustling years to the long ago when a raw-boned, ragged young man and a curly-headed, ten-year-old scion of "the gentry" fished the streams of a far-off green country in the camaraderie which all anglers know, and a fat, rosy, dimpled princess of five came toddling down the lush hillside from a dilapidated castle to listen to stories of the Little People in the gathering twilight.

Yet when he had traversed the park and turned down the broad Avenue sentimental reminiscence had been superseded by a reversion to the stern realities of the present. Old, heart-warming memories were all right in their place but a crime had been committed and Special Deputy McCarty was out for evidence which might lead to its perpetrator.

A block or two north of the Creveling house he stopped before one, which, although smaller by half than the palatial home in which Creveling had met his death, was built upon the same general architectural lines. An electric brougham stood at the curb and as McCarty descended the steps to the entrance and reached out his hand to touch the bell the door was opened from within by a lanky footman and a trim little figure appeared on the threshold.

With raven-black hair coiled beneath a smart little blue turban and eyes that were a still deeper blue set in the clear, alabaster oval of her face the young woman paused and regarded him with grave inquiry. The little princess grown up!

McCarty flushed and swept off his hat, ignoring the fact that the footman still held the door open, staring with all his eyes.

"Mrs. O'Rourke?"

"Yes. What is it, please?" Her voice was low and clear without a trace of impatience, but her gaze traveled past him to the waiting car.

"Could you spare me a few minutes on a matter of great importance, ma'am? I've come from Police Headquarters—"

"Police—?" A little frown had gathered between her narrow, straight brows. "Oh, I presume it is in connection with the sudden death of our friend Mr. Creveling?"

McCarty bowed again.

"You have heard from Mrs. Creveling?"

"Yes. Her maid was sent to me with a message not an

hour ago.—But come in; I can spare you a few minutes, of course, but I am afraid that I will be of little assistance to you. You are a detective?"

She added the question as she turned and led him past the round-eyed footman into a cool, dim drawing-room, motioning for him to take a seat.

McCarty regarded the fragile chair with some misgiving and settled his bulk gingerly upon it before he replied:

"Retired, ma'am, and it's only fair to tell you that I'm not here officially, so to speak. I'm an old friend of the inspector in charge of the case and he often calls on me to help him out by gathering general information for him when he's too busy to go after the side issues himself." McCarty beamed disingenuously upon her. "I'm sorry to be bothering you but the inspector wants me to see as many of the Crevelings' close friends as I can locate and find out if they have any idea why he would take his own life."

Mrs. O'Rourke drew a deep breath and her starry eyes widened.

"I thought—that is, Mrs. Creveling's message was to the effect that he had been shot!" Her tones vibrated through the stillness of the room. "I did not know that it was suicide. We—my husband and I—fancied that it was an accident of some kind. It did not occur to us—"

Her voice trailed off into silence and a faint wild-rose color appeared in the creamy whiteness of her delicate face.

"The medical examiner says that Mr. Creveling killed himself, but as a matter of form the inspector has to look into every possibility, ma'am, especially as up to now they've found no motive for suicide and Mrs. Creveling won't believe he did it himself," McCarty explained. "Might I ask you what message she sent you?"

"It did not come directly from her but from a mutual friend of ours who has come to town to stay with her during her trouble." Mrs. O'Rourke hesitated. "To a man it may sound horribly frivolous at such a time, but a woman

would understand that the conventions must be observed. This friend merely stated the fact of Mr. Creveling's sudden death and requested that I arrange about mourning for Mrs. Creveling. I was starting for the modiste's when you came."

"Who is this mutual friend?" McCarty added as a quick thought flashed across his mind: "Mrs. Douglas Waverly?"

The lady nodded.

"My husband has gone to the house now to offer his services and I would have accompanied him, of course, but Mrs. Waverly said that Mrs. Creveling was utterly prostrated and could not see me until later. It—it must be terrible for her!"

McCarty regarded the exquisite, flower-like face opposite in contemplative silence for a moment. There had been a suggestion of horror in her hushed tones when she spoke of the tragedy but only in that quick almost involuntary exclamation had real feeling made itself manifest, and her softly curving lips trembled for the first time. It was evident that her sympathy went out in generous abundance to the bereaved wife, but what of her attitude toward the dead man whom she had called their friend? Beyond a well-bred air of almost perfunctory regret he could discern no trace of any emotion other than a sort of shocked repugnance at the manner of his taking off.

"Mr. Creveling was an intimate friend of yours, ma'am?" McCarty asked.

"Of my husband's," she replied quickly. "Of course, we were all in the same set and met constantly at social affairs, but I naturally saw more of his wife. Mr. Creveling was essentially a—a man's man; I mean that his men friends would know more of his personal affairs than any of the women in his wife's immediate circle."

McCarty eyed her warily. Was it possible that there was a significance in her words other than that she had intended

to convey? She had spoken of the women like herself, those in his wife's circle; but what of other women? Could it be that unsavory rumors concerning the man now dead had reached even her ears?

Under his steady scrutiny she began to fumble with her glove and he noticed that her hands were little larger than those of a child. How tiny she was, and dainty, and Lord! how pretty! Irrelevantly his thoughts flashed back to the long ago. There was no trace of the childish treble in her low, softly vibrating tones, no suggestion of the rosy, tousle-headed baby in this well-poised woman with the colorless, brunette beauty of Ireland's highest type, and yet somehow he saw again in her the little companion of far-off days.

Her voice breaking the silence brought him back sharply to the problem of the moment.

"My husband will return at any minute and if you wait for him I am sure he will give you any information in his power, but I am afraid he will be able to help you as little as I can. It seems almost incredible that this should have come to pass. Mr. Creveling had everything to live for; a charming wife, money, friends, all that the world holds precious. It is very sad."

She made a slight gesture as if about to rise and terminate the interview, but McCarty stayed her.

"It's more than that, ma'am. I was with the inspector when he talked with Mrs. Creveling and, as I said, she won't have it that he killed himself, not even by accident. If a motive can't be proved for suicide it's apt to make a lot of trouble for the Department and bring notoriety on all their friends."

"You don't mean that Mrs. Creveling fancies some one actually killed her husband!" cried Mrs. O'Rourke in shocked amazement. "She must be hysterical, the blow has come so suddenly—!"

McCarty shook his head.

"I've seen many a hysterical woman when I was con-

nected with the force, ma'am, and she was far from it. I'd say Mrs. Creveling was the most level-headed one in the whole business and she took the news without the flicker of an eyelash. From the minute she heard he had been shot she set her mind on finding his possible murderer and she was so determined about it that she's called in the biggest man in his line in the country, the criminologist, Wade Terhune."

"Terhune! I've heard of him, of course," Mrs. O'Rourke observed. After a pause she added: "No one can blame her for wanting to be sure, to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that her husband was responsible for his own death when it occurred in such a dreadful, mysterious way, but if the medical examiner as you say has proved that it was a case of suicide she is only harrowing herself needlessly. Why should she think that any one would want to take Mr. Creveling's life?"

"For the same reason that you say the idea of his killing himself is almost incredible, as far as I can make out, ma'am; that he had no cause," McCarty responded. "My experience before I retired, though, taught me that there's many a trouble in a man's life that no one knows anything about. However, since this is a case of suicide the sooner the inspector establishes a motive for it the quicker the thought of its being anything else will die out of Mrs. Creveling's mind and the more ready she'll be to drop an investigation that's bound to bring annoyance to a lot of innocent people. Your name and Mr. O'Rourke's being mentioned as among their best friends, the inspector sent me to ask you in confidence if Mr. Creveling had seemed to be troubled about anything lately and if he'd maybe dropped a hint as to what might have been on his mind."

"No, I couldn't say that Mr. Creveling betrayed any sign that would lead one to think he was worried, much less that he contemplated suicide," Mrs. O'Rourke said slowly. "If anything, he has seemed to be in more than his usual

spirits, but I have seen little of him during the latter part of the season. Mrs. Creveling has been away, you know. My husband ran into him frequently about town, I believe; he would be better able to answer your question.—Oh, here he is now!”

The front door closed with a muffled jar and strong but springy footsteps crossed the hall. The next instant the curtains at the entrance to the drawing-room were thrust aside and a tall young man stood looking in upon them.

McCarty caught his breath. If the chubby little Lady Peggy had changed almost beyond recognition John Cavanaugh O'Rourke had not. The same clean-cut, freckled, sensitive face, the same thatch of brick-red hair still irrepressibly curly, the same clear gray eyes with the boyish twinkle barely subdued in them! McCarty could with difficulty restrain the exclamation which leaped to his lips.

“Come in, John.” Mrs. O'Rourke rose from her chair. “This man has been sent here by some official of the police department to make inquiries about Eugene, to learn if we know of any reason why he killed himself. I told him that you would be able to answer his questions better than I—”

“There's no answer!” Mr. O'Rourke came forward frankly. “There doesn't seem to be a reason in the world why the old boy should have done himself in. But why have you come to us?”

His tone was friendly and McCarty smiled broadly in response.

“Well, sir, your name was given to the inspector together with the Waverlys and Fords and several more as being among Mr. Creveling's closest friends and those most likely to know if he was in any trouble. I'm not properly connected with the force, though I was once, and the inspector calls me in now and then to help him out with details he hasn't time for. I've already seen Mr. Waverly, but I thought I'd come to you before any one else. If you've

seen Mrs. Creveling you'll know what attitude she's taken in the matter and if in spite of the medical examiner's report she insists it couldn't have been suicide—"

"I know." Mr. O'Rourke nodded with a quick jerk of the head, and added: "Look here, haven't I seen you before? Your face is familiar, somehow, and your voice, but I can't place you."

"You have, sir, and my lady, too, but 'tis long years gone. That's why I came to you first. All Mr. Creveling's friends are likely to be dragged in if Mrs. Creveling persists in disregarding the medical report and I wanted to save 'the' O'Rourke from what annoyance I could."

"“The” O'Rourke!" The young man's voice was suddenly husky. "No one in America has ever called me that!"

"You were not 'the' O'Rourke when I left the old country, sir," McCarty responded quietly. "Your father was alive then, God rest his soul. You were just a bit of a lad with a thatch of hair like a shanty afire who hunted and fished with me many's the time, and Lady Peggy, sawing her presence, was all petticoats and curls, and forever tumbling down—"

"Oh, and you didn't tell me!" A warm, soft light glowed in Mrs. O'Rourke's eyes and she held her tiny gloved hand out impulsively. "Who are you? I ought to remember—?"

"My name's McCarty, ma'am, though 'twill mean nothing to you, you were that young—"

"But it means something to me!" O'Rourke clapped him heartily on the shoulder. "Timothy McCarty, by all the powers! Timmie McCarty, who knew all the deepest pools and the thickest coverts, and where the Little People danced at the turn of the moon! You came to New York to seek your fortune—"

"And landed in the police force." McCarty's face grew suddenly grave. "I'm retired now, and a landed proprietor with tenants of my own, but now and again when my old

chief calls on me I take a hand in the game once more in an unofficial way, of course. I happened along the Avenue last night when the policeman on the beat discovered the body of Mr. Creveling—'tis too long a story to go into now but 'twill be all out in the afternoon papers—and when the inspector got there he kept me on. If the motive for suicide can be established—well and good. Mr. Terhune can potter around with his microscope and his little scientific machines as long as it pleases him and Mrs. Creveling will authorize him, but the matter will be dropped from the records of the department. If, however, no reason for Mr. Creveling's killing himself can be found and no actual proof that he did do it beyond the opinion of the medical examiner, then the inspector'll have to have everybody that knew him up on the carpet. That means notoriety for all his friends and I thought if you could give me privately a tip on why he maybe put himself out of the way I could see that you and my lady would both be left out of it."

McCarty paused expectantly and Mrs. O'Rourke's eyes traveled from him to her husband, but the young man shook his head and with his hands thrust deep in his pockets turned and began to pace the floor.

"That's the deuce of it!" he muttered. "Creveling was my friend and I am as anxious as any one could be to see the mystery of his death cleared up, but I cannot for the life of me conceive any reason why he should have killed himself. It couldn't have been any financial trouble for he's—"

"Well?" asked McCarty, for the other had caught himself up abruptly and stood staring down at the hearth rug.

"I—I understood that he was fixed for life; that his father knowing his recklessness where money was concerned had tied up a portion of his inheritance in a trust fund of some sort so that he could not dig into the entire principal, but I may be wrong. Alexander—George Alexander, his partner—is in a better position to inform you on that score

than I am. Now that I think of it, it seems to me that Creveling has been a bit queer lately; not despondent exactly, but moody. Perhaps there was something preying on his mind."

Mrs. O'Rourke opened her lips to speak but closed them again and McCarty saw in a sidelong glance that she was still staring fixedly at her husband, who kept his eyes studiously lowered. A dull flush had risen beneath the freckles and an odd note of constraint had come into his voice.

"It's your opinion then that he met with financial reverses?" McCarty affected to take no note of the change in Mr. O'Rourke's manner.

"I don't say that; the fact is, that I have no opinion whatever on the matter." The young man raised his eyes slowly. "I've known him for several years as one man knows another in the same crowd, especially when their wives are on an intimate footing, but nothing has ever happened to bring us closer together than on a basis of general goodfellowship. He has never discussed his affairs with me and he'd be far more likely to confide in Doug. Waverly or Nick Cutter. You've seen Waverly, you say? Couldn't he suggest any motive for suicide?"

"No more than yourself, sir."

"But you haven't interviewed Cutter yet, have you?" There was a singular note of eagerness now in the younger man's tones.

"No, sir; I've not had time." McCarty picked up his hat from the table where he had placed it and turned to Mrs. O'Rourke. "I'll say good day, my lady, and thank you for seeing me. I'm sorry if I've troubled you—"

"I'm not 'my lady' here, you know." She smiled faintly as she gave him her hand. "You say that you're not officially connected with the investigation into this dreadfully sad affair, Mr. McCarty? It is a pity, for we shall both be interested naturally in learning the truth; I mean the—the motive for the suicide. At any rate, you will come to see

us again now that you have found us, won't you? I have a warm spot in my heart, as John has, for a friend from the old country and there will always be a welcome for you."

"'Welcome?'" Mr. O'Rourke advanced and held out his hand. "I should say there would be! We've got to have a good, long talk about the old days, Timmie McCarty, you rascal! You must come and dine with us soon, just we three together, and we'll celebrate the reunion in the proper way. In the meantime, if there's anything I can do to help your friend, the inspector, to clear up this matter of poor Creveling's death just let me know."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't 'sir' me!" He laughed genially. "I was 'Johnnie' when we went fishing together, aye, and poaching, too!—Good-by. Don't forget to drop in on us whenever you can."

McCarty took his leave of them, conscious that Lady Peggy's troubled eyes followed him questioningly to the very door. There was more than one question in his own mind also as he strode off down the Avenue. What sudden thought had wrought the change in "the" O'Rourke's manner? At first frankly admitting that he knew of no reason for suicide on Creveling's part, he had promptly hedged and attempted by suggestion to shift the responsibility of a reply to other shoulders, notably those of Mr. Nicholas Cutter. Why? Had he indeed accepted suicide as the solution of Creveling's death or did he secretly incline toward the conviction held by Mrs. Creveling?

Whatever his opinion in the case, it was evident that his wife had her doubts, in spite of her air of amazed incredulity on learning of Mrs. Creveling's attitude. That slip she had made in saying that both she and her husband would be interested in learning "the truth" and then changing it quickly to "motive for the suicide" had been slight but significant, yet her surprise had been as genuine as McCarty's own at her husband's hesitancy and change of front.

What did she know or suspect? McCarty had had his own reasons for disclaiming any official connection with the investigation as well as for the assumption of unquestioning belief in the medical examiner's diagnosis, but had Lady Peggy's womanly intuition warned her of its fallacy or was there something more tangible in her mind and that of "the" O'Rourke, some doubt or suspicion which she was surprised to find that her husband shared?

His mind busied with vain conjecture, McCarty passed the Creveling house and continued south to Sixty-third Street, where he turned east to the address given him as that of Mrs. Baillie Kip. Jimmie Ballard's description of her as an unsuccessful social climber and the mystery of her recent admission to the exclusive circle in which the Crevelings had moved, made him curious not only as to her personality but to observe her reaction to the news of the tragedy. She could not be on as intimate terms with the Crevelings as friends of years' standing, but would she, too, scout the suggestion of suicide?

Her house was small, a mere slice between two larger ones, but gay with window boxes ablaze with color. An express wagon was drawn up at the curb before it and as McCarty reached the foot of the steps the door opened and a man appeared bearing upon his hunched back a huge, dark-green wardrobe trunk plentifully splattered with labels.

With a grunt he slammed it down upon the sidewalk and turned to unhook the backboard of the wagon and the tag fastened to the single handle at its top was directly beneath McCarty's eyes. In a glance he read the inscription written neatly in small but wavering characters:

"MISS LETITIA FROST

HOTEL FITZ-MAURICE

NEW YORK CITY."

The front door was still open and a trim little maid in a smartly frilled apron regarded him curiously as he mounted

the steps. On a sudden impulse he asked for Miss Frost.

"She's gone, sir. Went suddenly just this morning," the girl volunteered. "She's taken her dog with her, too, so if you're the man from the Greendale kennels come to see about boarding it—"

"I am not," McCarty interrupted with dignity. "If Miss Frost is not here I would like to see Mrs. Kip. Please tell her it is a matter of the greatest importance."

The girl hesitated, then somewhat doubtfully ushered him into a small reception room glittering with mirrors and spindle-legged gilt furniture and heady with perfume from the silken cushions heaped in every available space.

McCarty sniffed, choked, tried a chair which creaked alarmingly and finally planted himself in the center of the room facing the doorway, and waited.

He heard an indistinguishable murmur of feminine voices from above, the girl's and another, high-pitched and petulant. Then came a pause, the rustle of silk upon the stairs, and a plump young woman with hennaed hair and heavy-lidded hazel eyes stood before him. Her right arm was in a sling and her face drawn as with pain.

"I am Mrs. Kip. You wished to see me?"

"Yes, ma'am. I won't keep you but a moment." He added: "I've come from Mrs. Eugene Creveling's house—"

"Oh!" The lady flung out her free hand. "If you are a reporter I have positively nothing to say! I know the Crevelings, of course, and I am deeply shocked to learn of what has happened, but I do not care to discuss it."

"You mean Mr. Creveling's death, ma'am? How did you hear of it?" McCarty asked quickly. "'Tis not in the papers yet."

"I was awakened this morning by a message which was brought to me—but I really have no more to say!" She turned toward the door and as the light fell upon her face he saw that there were deep rings about her eyes and the

rouge, in spite of the artistry of its application, stood out in blotches against the unnatural pallor of her cheeks.

"At what time did this message reach you?" McCarty stood his ground.

"About nine o'clock, I think. I had retired early but passed a wretchedly wakeful night. I slipped on a—a rug yesterday and fell, spraining my arm—" She broke off, biting her reddened lips. "I must ask you to excuse me—!"

"Who sent that message, Mrs. Kip?" McCarty interrupted sternly.

"I do not care to say; it was a confidential communication from a—a close friend of the Crevelings," she stammered, and then drew herself up. "Why do you ask me all these questions? Who are you? My maid says you inquired for my companion Miss Frost."

"Yes, ma'am. Will you tell me where she has gone?" McCarty ignored the interrogations.

"To Chicago," Mrs. Kip replied hastily. "A—a relative of hers is ill and sent for her." Then her manner changed and as though impelled beyond the dictates of her own prudence she asked, "How did it happen? Who shot Mr. Creveling?"

"Himself, ma'am. When I saw Mr. Waverly this morning just before he sent you that message 'twas thought that a murder had been committed, but it's been proven that Mr. Creveling died by his own hand."

Mrs. Kip wavered and the color swept back in a warm tide over her face.

"Suicide?" she murmured. "How—how dreadful! I sympathize with Mrs. Creveling but I know nothing of their affairs, nothing, and I refuse to be catechized further! My maid will show you to the door."

CHAPTER IX

“DONE FOR!”

McCARTY smiled to himself as he left Mrs. Kip's house and started eastward. That shot in the dark had found its mark; she had not denied that Waverly was the sender of the message warning her of Creveling's death, and that he himself had been interrogated in connection with it. But why had she been so warned? How was she concerned and what had her relations been to the dead man and to Waverly? Could it be that she was the woman in the case, the woman because of whom they had quarreled a fortnight before?

That she had been apprised of his possible coming and knew that he was no reporter McCarty was well aware despite her pretense. Why had she lied so hastily about the whereabouts of her companion Miss Frost? But for the lucky chance of his arrival at the moment that the trunk was being removed he would in all probability never have heard of the woman. Could the events of the night have had anything to do with her sudden departure?

McCarty boarded a downtown Madison Avenue car, his thoughts still busied with the queries which that brief interview evoked. Mrs. Kip had protested against his interrogation, but she had not dared to turn him summarily from her door until she learned that suicide had been accepted by the police as the solution of the mystery. Did she believe that Creveling had killed himself and was notoriety all that she feared? The only statements she volunteered were that she had retired early on the previous night and

the explanation of her bandaged arm. She had slipped on a rug—but was that the true explanation?

She was pretty enough in a florid, overblown way and there was a devil of mischief in her eye; just the type to appeal to a man satiated with cold beauty and smothered in conventions, yet she wasn't the sort to lose her head. McCarty was convinced of that. She had made a hard fight for social recognition according to Jimmie Ballard and now that it was won she would take care that no hint of scandal jeopardized it. There was something vaguely familiar about her, too, and McCarty had an almost photographic memory. Where had he seen her before?

At the Fitz-Maurice Hotel he alighted from the car. It was well on into the luncheon hour and the lobby of the fashionable hostelry was crowded, but he shouldered his way through the throng to the desk and asked for Miss Letitia Frost. After an interval he was directed to the elevator and upon one of the upper floors he was ushered into a tiny rear suite, to find himself confronting a stout, elderly woman with a high, thin nose and bright, dark eyes whose darting glances were like those of some predatory bird beneath a mass of elaborately coiffed white hair.

"I am Miss Frost. May I ask what your business is with me?" Her voice boomed out with surprising depth and austerity.

"Just to ask you a few questions, ma'am, if you'll be good enough to answer them," McCarty replied meekly with a disarming smile.

He was about to continue when the lady forestalled him.

"By what authority, if you please?" she demanded coolly. "Your name is unknown to me—"

"By the authority of the Police Commissioner!" McCarty interrupted, his usually impervious good nature deserting him for the moment in the face of her arrogance. "You've been acting, I understand, as companion for Mrs. Baillie Kip."

"Police!" Miss Frost gasped. "Oh, that horrible, low-bred creature! I feared gossip and possibly scandal but never, never this! What is it, sir? What has she done?"

"I didn't say she had done anything, ma'am," McCarty said more mildly, for the sharp hawk-like face seemed to have aged perceptibly in the last minute. "We just want to get a line on her, that is all."

"It is enough!" Miss Frost wrung her hands. "To think that I should have been so misguided as to lend her the prestige of my chaperonage, a woman who is—is questionable in the eyes of the police! I shall never be able to hold up my head again—I, whose position in society has always been unassailable in spite of financial reverses! My reputation, my standing will be ruined—!"

"Not at all, ma'am, you can rest easy on that score. This is confidential, just between the two of us. Your name needn't even be mentioned if you'll tell me what you know about her."

Miss Frost glanced about her helplessly and then sank into the nearest chair, with a fluttering gesture toward one across the table.

"I know literally nothing about Mrs. Kip!" she disclaimed. "Less, in fact, than on the day when I went to make my home with her. The Frosts are one of the oldest families in society and in my younger days—but I digress. For the last ten years or more, Mr.—er—McCarty, I have found it necessary to augment my income by introducing to society certain members of the *nouveau riche* who would otherwise have been unable to obtain a foothold. I have been instrumental in arranging some of the most brilliant alliances of the past decade. You have heard of Senator Welkyn?"

McCarty nodded.

"His wife was an absolute failure in Washington four years ago but I schooled her with the utmost patience and last season succeeded in launching her triumphantly at New-

port." Miss Frost continued nervously. "Finding that she no longer needed my sponsorship, she presented Mrs. Kip to me as the widow of a Western copper king. I have blamed myself a hundred times since for not having looked up Mrs. Kip's antecedents with my usual care, but Mrs. Welkyn's minute details of her history and assurance that they had been girls together convinced me that she was quite—er—possible, especially as I had watched her previous unsuccessful attempt to break into society some years ago and knew that she had held herself sedulously above any hint of gossip.

"We came to a financial agreement last autumn and on my advice she took the house in which she now lives and where I went to reside with her. You must know the success of my efforts in her behalf even in so short a time; she is received at the larger functions everywhere and has even achieved a degree of intimacy with such people as Mr. John and Lady Margaret O'Rourke, the Douglas Waverlys, Nicholas Cutter and their set. I had intended to eliminate the Waverlys in the course of time as my—er—client penetrated still more exclusive circles, and was really using Nicholas Cutter merely as a stepping-stone to that end for he holds the open sesame everywhere, you know, but Mrs. Kip did not prove tractable.

"For a long time I have felt uneasy about her. In the first place she was most secretive about her financial affairs. I was given to understand in a general way that she had large holdings in the West from which she received ample dividends, but I observed that those dividends seemed to fluctuate in value more irregularly than even the wild-cat stocks in which my poor misguided father lost most of his fortune years ago. At times Mrs. Kip would indulge in the most reckless extravagances and at others there would seem to be scarcely sufficient available funds to maintain her comparatively small establishment and notices would come from the bank that her account was over-

drawn quite alarmingly, but she would always manage to recoup at the crucial moment."

"How?" McCarty asked.

"That was one of the mysteries which gradually seemed to arise about her, at least in my mind." Miss Frost spoke now with evident care. "I fancied she had influential friends from whom she borrowed when necessary, but I never could learn who they were. Another thing about her which I could not understand, Mr. McCarty, was the reason for her unexplained absences at most—most unconventional hours. Usually I arrange a daily social program for my clients as though they were *débutantes*, but Mrs. Kip soon gave me to understand that she would exercise her own judgment in such matters. I do not pry into the affairs of other people, but when I am practically responsible for their presentation to the right society I must be sure that they do not jeopardize my reputation as well as theirs by indiscretions, however innocent."

"And Mrs. Kip was what you call indiscreet, ma'am?" McCarty's own words were carefully chosen.

The lady set her thin lips in a straight line.

"That is the mildest word with which I can describe her conduct, Mr. McCarty, although I could not with actual proof breathe a word against her personal character or reputation. I only know that she would go out, sometimes in the afternoon but more frequently at night, and remain until all hours without a word to me as to her plans and the next morning she would invariably appear haggard and worn, in a state of nervous exhaustion bordering on prostration, as though she had been through some feverish excitement."

McCarty leaned forward with sudden interest.

"How often did she go on these expeditions of hers?"

"Only occasionally at first and at irregular intervals; sometimes on several successive days, and then a week or two would elapse before she went again. It seemed to me at times as though she were fighting something and if I

were not familiar with the habits and demeanor of a drug addict through an unfortunate experience with a former client I would have believed her a victim. I forebore to question her at first, but of late her disappearances have become more frequent, averaging several times a week; she has totally forgotten or disregarded engagements for social functions for which I had been at infinite trouble and pains to procure invitations for her, placing me in a most embarrassing position. Indeed, it seems to me that she had lost all ambition for her own advancement and was content to drift. Her financial affairs, too, appear to have reached a crisis and I felt that at last I should be compelled to speak."

Miss Frost was nervously clasping and unclasping the arms of her chair and a fine network of veins stood out upon her forehead.

"Did Mrs. Kip receive any messages or telephone calls just before she went out on these occasions?"

"Sometimes, but I never knew their nature nor from whom they came."

"Did she go alone?"

"Invariably."

"And come home alone?" McCarty insisted.

"As far as I know." Miss Frost shrugged. "She always used her own latch-key and the servants were instructed to leave the chain off the door but were never permitted to wait up for her. I did once, but Mrs. Kip was displeased and made a most distressing scene, practically accusing me of attempting to interfere in her affairs. I should have left her then but I realized that she was unnerved and not quite herself and made allowances, too, for her lack of breeding. However, I could not tolerate my position any longer after this morning!"

"What happened, ma'am?" McCarty heaved a sigh of relief. "'Twas that I wanted particularly to see you about."

"There was a musicale last night—the last of Mrs. Fales

Ogden's Lenten affairs, and one of the most exclusive of the season—and I had with the exercise of the greatest diplomacy obtained invitations for Mrs. Kip and myself. Late in the afternoon Mrs. Kip went out alone and on her return informed me flatly that she had made another engagement for the evening and would not be able to attend the musicale. I was deeply affronted, but in my position, Mr. McCarty, one must use the utmost tact at all times and I did not protest, merely dispatching a last-minute excuse of sudden illness to Mrs. Fales Ogden. Mrs. Kip did not dress for dinner and about ten o'clock she called a taxi instead of her motor and went out in the plain velvet tailor-made and sables she had worn in the afternoon.

"My discontent in my position had been growing and I was seriously considering the severance of my connection with Mrs. Kip; her dereliction last night was the final straw and I determined that this morning we must have a thorough understanding. I could not sleep under the circumstances, so I know definitely at what hour Mrs. Kip returned."

She paused and McCarty eyed her expectantly. Mrs. Kip had been at pains to impress upon him the fact that she had retired early; had she gotten the uncompromising Miss Frost out of the way that her lie might not be refuted?

"Well?" he urged, as the elderly companion was still silent.

"Mr. McCarty, it was almost daylight! I heard her close the front door downstairs and slide the chain into its groove, although she did it as quietly as possible. Then she came up the stairs, stumbling and catching at the balustrade as though she were faint or ill. I arose and was on the point of going to her when I remembered her displeasure on that former occasion, so I merely opened my door and glanced out into the hall. She passed without seeing me and I—I was so shocked at her appearance that I could not have uttered a word had I so desired!"

"What was the matter with her?" McCarty demanded.

"Her sable scarf was gone, although she still held her muff, and her velvet suit was torn and bedraggled." Miss Frost spoke with morbid relish and her dark eyes snapped balefully. "She limped, too, and hugged one arm to her side as though it hurt her. I should have gone to her assistance at once had not something in her expression warned me that she was not in any mood to brook intrusion. Pain and rage and a look of vindictive determination were all written in her face and I withdrew and shut my door. I could hear her pacing the floor of her room until the day broke when I fell asleep at last. I arose at my usual hour, however, and came downstairs just in time to see her receive a note from the hands of a messenger. I was astonished to see her up and dressed for she usually breakfasted in bed, especially when she had been out—"

"Wait a minute, please," McCarty interrupted her. "You saw the messenger, you say; was he in uniform?"

"No. I did not observe him particularly, but he appeared to be a shabby looking lad. Mrs. Kip bade me good morning in an absent-minded sort of way and instead of following me into the breakfast room, went into the library with the unopened note in her hand and closed the door. I saw that her arm was clumsily bandaged and while I was at breakfast the doctor was announced; she must have summoned him before I arose. I slipped out into the hall as he was leaving and asked him how Mrs. Kip's arm was, and he said that she had suffered a bad sprain and made some reference to a fall which I did not understand until later."

"Was it about her slipping on a rug or something yesterday?" asked McCarty.

"Yes, as I remember!" Miss Frost glanced at him in surprise and then went on: "Mrs. Kip came down again in a few minutes and at my natural inquiry about her injury she told me that she had slipped and fallen in her room

on her return the night before. She must have seen in my face that I knew the truth, for suddenly she flared out at me with all the violence of an unrestrained, ill-bred nature and a most disgraceful scene ensued!"

Miss Frost's head with its elaborate puffs bobbed agitatedly and an indignant flush mottled her face.

"I had never realized before how thin was the veneer; how utterly common she was! I can assure you, Mr. McCarty, that I have never been so insulted! Among other remarks which I shall not repeat, she said that she was not a child and was tired of my eternal spying; that I was an interfering old busybody! She actually dared to insinuate that I was a—a sort of society grafter, an object of charity, after all that I have done for her! I was simply stunned, but when I pulled myself together to announce of my own accord my immediate departure from her house she forestalled me by demanding that I leave at once. She actually dismissed me! Gave me notice, as though I were a servant! Words cannot describe my humiliation, but if I can build social reputations I can also demolish them! Mrs. Baillie Kip will not find a door open to her three days from now!"

"Hold on a bit, ma'am!" McCarty stemmed the outraged flow of words. "She got in a temper just because you *looked* disbelieving at her excuse about her arm?"

"Well, no," the lady conceded. "I was disgusted at the insult to my intelligence and let her know what I had seen. I think I also mentioned other occasions to which I had taken silent objection and perhaps I expressed my opinion as to being used as a cloak for actions which I did not understand. When our interview terminated I packed at once and came here.

"In strict justice to the woman I cannot say that her manner was other than most circumspect when she was under my eye; she was popular and had several admirers, but there was no suspicion of a love affair. I did not know

what to think of those nocturnal excursions of hers, but I could not believe that there was anything actually disgraceful about them. Still, servants talk and such things get about; I was afraid, as I say, of scandalous rumors and gossip, but I never thought of anything criminal! What is it, Mr. McCarty? I have told you all I know and I am at your mercy! Tell me what hideous notoriety I must prepare myself to undergo?"

"None, I hope, ma'am," he responded. "You say she was recklessly extravagant at times; what did she spend her money on?"

"Rare jewels, more furs than she could possibly wear and antique rugs and objects of art which she was too ignorant to appreciate. She bought as mere fancy dictated, seemingly for the sheer pleasure of spending money."

"That neck piece that she wore out last night and didn't have on her when she came back—?" McCarty began.

"That was one instance of her extravagance," Miss Frost interrupted him. "She has another set of sables, as well as all kinds of fur garments for every possible occasion, yet she must have these because they were reputed to have been made for the Czarina and smuggled out of Russia after the revolution. Twenty thousand she paid Van Brinken for the set and the very next week she was unable to meet her florist's bill!"

"How would you describe that neck piece, ma'am?"

"A five-skin scarf of Imperial black Russian sables," replied Miss Frost promptly. "The private seal of the Czarina was stamped on the small gold clasp which fastened it together under one of the skins at the throat."

There was a pause and then McCarty asked:

"Who were Mrs. Kip's admirers? You say she had several—?"

Miss Frost raised her hands in protest.

"I really couldn't think of mentioning names! It would mean social suicide for me to drag into the notoriety of a

police investigation in connection with this woman any of the prominent families whose friendship I enjoy, especially as I do not know what she has done!" Her voice rose quaveringly. "I would never be able to obtain another client!"

"But this is just confidential, between you and me." McCarty smiled. "I know all about the Waverlys and O'Rourkes and Crevelings, but as far as I can make out Cutter is the only bachelor in their immediate set."

"Mr. Cutter has been attentive to Mrs. Kip, but not more so than to many another attractive widow or divorcée," Miss Frost observed. "No débutante has ever interested him although he would be a splendid catch. One of my few failures was an attempt to bring about a marriage between him and Gwendolyn Rossmore. I managed to send her in to dinner with him three times in succession and you would never believe the trouble I took to drill conversation into that girl! Sports with the *hors d'œuvres*, art with the soup and fish, Maeterlinck with the entrée, opera with the roast—but all for nothing! He is the most difficult—"

"Ha-h'm!" McCarty looked somewhat dazed, but stuck doggedly to his point. "About the gentlemen who paid attention to Mrs. Kip. Who were the others, Miss Frost?"

"Well, if you must know, Fales Ogden, junior, and Harry Palladin and Jules Thoreau were among others but none of them was serious and I am compelled to say that she did not encourage them. Although I lived in the same house with her we were never upon an intimate footing and I could not induce her to discuss the past, but I gathered that widowhood was rather a release for her; she assured me more than once that she would never marry again."

"Well, ma'am." McCarty rose. "I'll not be detaining you any longer now, nor will I give you away. Mrs. Kip may be all right as far as we know, but we've reasons for wanting to look her up and make sure. Good day to you, ma'am."

Leaving the agitated social sponsor, McCarty made his way from the Fitz-Maurice to a modest quick-lunch establishment near the Grand Central Station. He had forgotten all about breakfast in the excitement of the morning and now he ordered a hearty meal, pondering as he ate upon the information he had just gained. What could be the explanation of Mrs. Kip's mysterious conduct? What dominating factor caused her to set aside the social ambition which had been her ruling passion for years, ignore invitations for which she had long angled in vain, and steal almost surreptitiously from her own house on secret errands?

The questions multiplied in McCarty's brain. Where had she been on the previous night that she found it necessary to lie about it? What was in that message which Waverly had sent to her, and what was her connection—a rank outsider—with the set in which the Crevelings had moved? That some community of interest drew them together was plain, but what could there be in common between a gentleman like John O'Rourke and a bounder like Waverly, an aristocrat such as Mrs. Creveling and a climber of Mrs. Kip's type? Could the answer be found among the others of their immediate circle?

It was almost three o'clock when, having finished his meal, McCarty hailed a taxi and drove to the St. Maur apartments on Madison Avenue. Mrs. Lonsdale Ford was at home and would see him. Reluctantly he dropped in the elevator the newspaper which he had purchased on leaving the lunch-room and in which his interview with Jimmie Ballard appeared with arrant embellishments, trusting that a copy of it had not yet reached the eyes of the lady upon whom he was calling, but his hope was a vain one. Even as an obsequious Japanese butler ushered him into the drawing-room the curtains leading to the library parted and a slender, little woman with round, china-blue eyes and hair like spun flax fairly precipitated herself upon him.

"Oh, you're Officer McCarty, who found poor Mr. Creveling's body!" she exclaimed in a high, babbling voice. "I've been reading about you in the paper! Please, *please* tell me how it happened! I tried to get Mrs. Creveling on the 'phone but she wouldn't talk to me or else Stella Waverly wouldn't let her! I can't get my husband until the stock market closes and I've been just *wild*!"

"The Crevelings are great friends of yours, ma'am?"

"Of *course*! This is the most *shocking* thing!" She seemed to speak in italics and her tone suggested that the shock was more exciting than deplorable. "Lonny—my husband—and Mr. Creveling have put through several deals together and they were *great* pals! I think Mrs. Creveling is just the *sweetest* thing; I've missed her *horribly* since she has been out of town!—But *did* Mr. Creveling kill himself? Of course, you found the pistol in his hand, the paper says, but then there was that burglar you captured. I think it was too brave of you for *anything*!"

McCarty eyed the doll-like face before him with its insipid prettiness and his wonderment grew. "Sweet" was not a term he would have applied to the strong, self-contained Mrs. Creveling. What could there be in common between her and this shallow, empty-headed little creature?

"'Tis the opinion of the medical examiner that it was suicide, ma'am," he said gravely. "We're trying to find out from Mr. Creveling's friends if they knew of any reason he could have for killing himself; if he seemed in trouble or low in his mind. When was the last time you or your husband saw him?"

"I think Lonny saw him only yesterday, on business. The last time we met him together was on Tuesday evening, and we expected him last night but he didn't appear."

"He had an engagement with you?"

Mrs. Ford bit her pouting underlip and for the merest second the round, childish, blue eyes narrowed with a shrewdness oddly foreign and incongruous to them.

"Not with us, and it wasn't an—an engagement exactly. My husband and I dined and spent the evening with Mr. Cutter and they are such inseparable friends that we rather thought he might drop in."

A sudden remembrance of Douglas Waverly's testimony flashed across McCarty's mind. The last time he admitted having seen Creveling had been on Tuesday evening also, at the house of Nicholas Cutter.

"'Twas at Mr. Cutter's that you saw him on Tuesday, then, wasn't it?" he asked. "Who else was there?"

"The O'Rourkes and Mr. Douglas Waverly and Mrs. Baillie Kip." Mrs. Ford spoke haltingly and the high treble had lowered. "Mr. Creveling seemed in the very best of spirits; he always was when he—"

"When he what, ma'am?" McCarty prompted quickly as she paused.

The blue eyes fell and she began fiddling nervously with the many rings which covered her small fingers.

"When he'd got something that he wanted." The words came in a little rush. "He had a perfect *craze* for antiques, you know; musty old tapestries and faded rugs and books that nobody ever heard of. This time it was a rug, I think, with some queer unpronounceable name. He'd been after it for *months*—"

"I see," McCarty interrupted dryly. "Do you remember, ma'am, whether him and Mr. Waverly had much talk together that night?"

"Why, no!" The blue eyes opened wide once more. "I don't remember that they even *spoke*, but I wasn't paying any attention to them. I know Mr. Creveling left early, very soon after Mr. Waverly came."

"Is it a habit of Mr. Cutter's to entertain so much in his own house?"

Mrs. Ford stared at him and opened her lips to reply when there came the sound of a key grating in the lock of the hall door, and with a glad little cry she sprang up and

rushed from the room. McCarty heard the door open and close, a muffled exclamation:—"Oh, Lonny!"—and then a man's voice rasped out hoarsely:

"You've heard, Nellie? You know? We're done for, girl! Done for!"

CHAPTER X

ILSA

AS the significance of the harsh, despairing cry penetrated his mind McCarty half rose from his chair in the Fords' gawdy drawing-room and then sank back into it again, for the woman's voice rose sharply.

"The man is here! The man who found the body—!"

The shrill tones ceased in a gurgle as though a hand had been laid suddenly over her lips and a low mutter replied to her, in which the only distinct words that came to McCarty's ears were "confounded little fool!" Some question evidently followed to which she replied in a sibilant whisper and then a tall, lanky man with hair thinning at the temples and eager, harassed, brown eyes strode into the room.

"What do you want?" he demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been sent by the inspector in charge of the investigation into Eugene Creveling's death, sir," responded McCarty, rising.

"Well, what about it?" the other asked truculently. "We knew him, of course, but why have you come to us?"

"To find out if you could help us get at any reason for his suicide," McCarty explained, ignoring the antagonism in Ford's manner. "Mr. George Alexander says you were a friend of Mr. Creveling's and Mrs. Ford told me just now that you and him have put through some deals together; you might know if anything had been preying on the mind of him."

"Suicide, eh?" Ford's tone was cooler, as though he had in a measure regained composure. "How the devil

should I know his affairs if his own family don't? Alexander is a doddering ass, and as for my wife, she knows nothing about my business; she probably heard some propositions discussed in a general way and jumped to conclusions. You've got no right to come here and question her or me either! We've nothing to say, and that's the end of it!"

"You saw Creveling yesterday—" McCarty persisted.

"How in hell do you know that!" Ford exploded suddenly and turned upon his wife who stood shrinkingly in the doorway. "More of your infernal chatter, eh? Will you never learn to keep your mouth shut!"

"You had a business conference with him," McCarty interposed firmly. "What was the nature of that business, Mr. Ford? Why should your wife keep quiet about it?"

"Because it was a confidential matter!" the other retorted savagely. "A proposition between us two alone and it had nothing to do with whatever happened last night; we didn't come to any decision, anyway. I'm sorry Creveling's dead, of course, but if he killed himself he probably knew what he was about. I don't, and you've got a devil of a nerve to come here and try to cross-examine my wife merely because we happened to be acquainted with the Crevelings! Go back to your inspector or the Police Commissioner himself if you like and say that if we are annoyed any farther or dragged into this there will be trouble. I've got influence in this town!"

The man's hands worked nervously and his blood-shot eyes glared at McCarty as the latter nodded.

"Very well, sir. I came to you quiet like, as I've been to most of Mr. Creveling's other close friends to save them the trouble and publicity of being subpœnaed if it comes to that. You'll appreciate the fact that we've got to establish a motive for suicide or there may be a lot more unpleasant notoriety for all concerned."

"*We* are not concerned, and I refuse to discuss the matter farther, sir! We know nothing of Creveling's private affairs and no motive for his suicide." Ford gestured toward the door. "Good afternoon!"

With a slight bow to Mrs. Ford, who stepped aside as though in a daze to let him pass, McCarty left the room and as he shot downward in the elevator the scene which had just occurred impressed itself upon him with a new and two-fold suggestion of mystery. Ford was evidently beside himself, on the brink of desperation—why? His cry of being "done for" together with Mrs. Ford's warning that the man who had found "the body" was there seemed to hold an unmistakable and damning significance, yet his subsequent manner was a puzzle. It was almost as though some other and quite irrelevant issue confronted him, something beside which the manner of Creveling's death was of small moment. His concern appeared chiefly to get McCarty out of the way, heedless of the impression he created. The look upon his wife's face as McCarty passed her, too, returned to the latter's mind. Terror had been written there and bewilderment as though a crushing blow had descended upon her, yet she had displayed lively interest rather than apprehension before the arrival of her husband. Was she clever enough to have dissembled? He remembered her odd hesitation, that momentary flash of shrewdness which had darted from her eyes, but shook his head doubtfully.

What was the matter with everybody, anyway? Alexander, the valet, Mrs. Creveling, Douglas Waverly, Mrs. Kip, and now the Fords! All of them seemed to be holding back, concealing something, blocking him at every step of the way! Was it a conspiracy of silence, or had each of them a separate secret?

On a sudden impulse he turned westward once more to Fifth Avenue and back to the Creveling house. It was

there the whole thing had started and there perhaps that the key might be found.

"Mrs. Creveling is ill, sir. The doctor and her maid and Mrs. Waverly are with her and I don't believe she can see you," the butler informed him. There was an obvious increase of servility in his manner and McCarty wondered with an inward chuckle of amusement whether any intimation of his former coöperation with Terhune were responsible for the change.

"Please say I won't keep her except for a minute and I'll not be bothering her with anything that will harrow up her feelings," McCarty announced. "I just want a little general information."

"It's a terrible shock." The butler lingered conversationally. "A fine gentleman to work for, Mr. Creveling was; I doubt but that there'll be great changes in the 'ousehold now with 'im gone. Sarah and me'll be looking for another place as soon as things get straightened out 'ere, and no mistake about it."

"Why?" McCarty demanded. "You're not going to keep on your positions with Mrs. Creveling?"

"Not any, sir!" Rollins shook his head emphatically. "She's a grand lady, but too interfering with the 'ousehold accounts to suit people that 'as a reputation for being 'onest, and she's 'ard, sir: unfeeling, I'd call it. But you saw 'er this morning, 'earing the news and never turning a 'air! The way she treated Ilsa shows what she'd do to a body she was down on!"

"Who's Ilsa?" asked McCarty quickly.

"A 'ousemaid, sir, and as pretty a trick as you'd find in a day's walk. Not that I 'old with square'eads, but she was a winner and no mistake. Worked 'ere for four months and most satisfactory, but when the jewels disappeared—!" Rollins drew himself up suddenly. "Yes, sir. I'll take the message, sir."

McCarty glanced about for the source of the interrup-

tion and beheld a gentleman carrying a small black bag descend the stairs. He stepped forward as the latter reached the bottom.

"Excuse me, sir, but are you Mrs. Creveling's doctor?"

"I am. May I ask—?" The other paused regarding him with questioning but not antagonistic gaze.

"I'm connected with the investigation into Mr. Creveling's death, sir," McCarty explained. "If you're the family doctor and have attended Mr. Creveling lately, I would like to know if 'tis your opinion that anything was preying on his mind?"

The physician frowned and his neatly pointed black Vandyke beard thrust itself out slightly.

"My dear sir!" he began. "Professional ethics—"

"I know all about them, sir. Many's the time I've run up against them," McCarty interrupted wearily. "You'll not be betraying Mr. Creveling's confidence in anything you tell now and we're bound to get at the truth. Has he seemed like himself to you?"

The physician started.

"You are suggesting that the wound which caused his death may have been self-inflicted?" he demanded.

"That's the opinion of the medical examiner, though I know Mrs. Creveling doesn't hold with it," McCarty responded. "When did you see Mr. Creveling last?"

"About three weeks ago; there was nothing serious physically, just a slight cold." The physician glanced about him, but Rollins had disappeared up the stairs and the great hall was empty. "I found him, however, in an exceedingly excitable condition of the nerves, a state which I may say has been growing upon him gradually during the last few years and is not at all unusual in men of his stamp."

"You mean after the life he's led?" asked McCarty bluntly.

"Er—if you choose to put it in that manner," the other

replied cautiously. "Understand, please, the condition I refer to does not in any way imply the slightest degree of mental disorder; it pertains to the nervous system only. I am not an alienist and I should not care to give a professional opinion on the matter, but privately I would say that Mr. Creveling was as sane as any man of my acquaintance."

"He was nervous, you say, though," McCarty remarked. "Do you mean that he seemed uneasy about anything, sir?"

"Apprehensive?" the physician amended. "Not in the least; in fact, he was in his usual high spirits. A bit over, if anything; on edge, if you know what I mean."

McCarty nodded gravely.

"It didn't strike you that those high spirits were put on, Doctor, did it? I've noticed in my line of work that when a man tries to bluff he's apt to get it over a little too strong and show his hand."

"No. His manner was genuine enough. He was just jumpy, you know; fidgeting about, restless, starting at the slightest sound. I remember warning him against late hours and overdoing things generally, and suggested a sea trip to pull him together, but he only laughed at me and said he never felt more fit in his life."

"Did you speak to Mrs. Creveling about it?"

The physician hesitated.

"I believe I did mention the advisability of a sea voyage to her, not a yachting trip with its usual social accompaniments but a long, slow, restful journey preferably in the tropic seas. It was more on her account than her husband's, however; these society women burn themselves out and wonder why they are old at forty. Mrs. Creveling has done too much this season and was on the point of a breakdown even before last night's tragedy. That was why she closed the establishment here and went to visit friends on Long Island a month ago."

"She's not too sick to see me now for a minute, I hope, Doctor?" McCarty asked.

Before the former could reply Rollins appeared upon the stairs.

"You can go up, sir," he announced.

"Do not remain any longer than necessary, please, and try to avoid exciting Mrs. Creveling if you can," the physician admonished. "I have just given her something to make her relax and sleep. She is keeping too tight a rein upon herself; if we are not careful the tension will snap."

"Just what do you mean, Doctor? Brain fever?" McCarty paused on the lowest step of the stairs.

"There is no such disease known in *materia medica*." The other smiled. "It exists solely in fiction, my dear sir. No, Mrs. Creveling is in danger of nervous prostration. Please make your interview with her as brief as possible."

McCarty promised and the physician turned to the door which Rollins was holding open for him while the ex-groundsman proceeded up the stairs. He had learned little of importance, owing perhaps to the reticence of the medical man, but the butler's interrupted confidence had suggested a new train of conjecture. It was the first he had heard about the disappearance of any jewels. What had Mrs. Creveling done to the housemaid, Ilsa, and what part, if any, could the girl have had in the drama of the previous night?

At the head of the stairs he found a trim but white-faced young Frenchwoman awaiting him and was conducted to the boudoir of the apartments he had visited twice during the night on his search. There he found Mrs. Creveling reclining upon a couch, with a startlingly thin, sinuous red-haired woman coiled gracefully in a big chair beside her. The latter glanced up at him in a bored, contemptuous manner at his intrusion and McCarty caught a flash of green, feline eyes and the curl of vivid, narrow lips.

"I'm sorry to bother you, ma'am." He paused before

Mrs. Creveling, who acknowledged his presence by a slight motion of her hand toward a chair. "I wouldn't have come to you again to-day but there are a few things I'd like to ask you—"

"I wish you to have all the information you may require, Mr. McCarty." She spoke still in the cold, level, self-contained tones of the morning but with a drowsy under-note. The doctor's medicine was evidently beginning to take effect. "I want only to learn who killed my husband."

"Yes, ma'am." McCarty seated himself on the edge of the chair and reluctantly relinquished his hat to the maid who had followed and held out her hand for it. "Maybe it'll seem to you that I'm asking a lot of foolish questions that have nothing to do with the case, but I'll ask you to answer them, just the same, without taking up your time now to explain. It's come to our notice that some jewels were supposed to have disappeared from your house sometime during the past winter. Is this true, ma'am?"

"Yes. The set of emeralds and diamonds which I had taken from the vault at the trust company to wear at Mrs. Fales Ogden's pageant in February," Mrs. Creveling replied quickly, her apathy stirred by surprise at the question. "It was reported to the police and one of the servants arrested and held for trial, but she succeeded in obtaining bail and then disappeared, forfeiting it.—You remember the woman, Stella? She was a Swede and of quite striking appearance."

She had turned to her companion and the latter nodded with a cynical smile.

"Quite too striking!" she murmured. "I am always suspicious of servants who appear out of the picture!"

"This lady is Mrs. Douglas Waverly," Mrs. Creveling explained as if in an afterthought. "She is quite in my confidence and you may speak unreservedly before her."

McCarty bowed, but addressed himself still to Mrs. Creveling.

"About this servant, ma'am: what was her name?"

"Ilsa Helwig."

"What does she look like, ma'am?"

"You can find her description at your headquarters, I imagine," replied Mrs. Creveling coldly. "She was a huge, broad-shouldered, deep-chested woman with large hands and feet and great, thick ropes of tow-colored hair wound about her head. Her skin was very fair and her eyes blue, I believe. One would call her handsome, in a coarse way."

There was a pause and then McCarty changed the subject.

"Did you recover your emeralds, ma'am?"

"No. The police could find no trace of them but the evidence was conclusive."

"The very fact that the creature jumped her bail was proof enough of her guilt, I should say," observed Mrs. Waverly. "It is astonishing that the police have not located her if they are really making an effort to do so. Those things were worth a small fortune, weren't they, Myra?"

"Thirty thousand dollars," Mrs. Creveling responded. "I never cared particularly for them but an example should have been made of the girl."

"What was the evidence against her, ma'am?" McCarty inquired.

"No one else had an opportunity." Mrs. Creveling settled herself back languidly on her couch. "I had brought the jewels home myself from the trust company vaults in a plain brown morocco case, late one afternoon, several days before the pageant was to take place, meaning to try their effect with my costume. Its delivery was delayed by the modiste, however, and it did not arrive until a few hours before the affair. My maid, Yvonne, was ill and I rang for Ilsa to assist me in trying it on. While Rollins was taking the message to her I crossed the hall to Mr. Creveling's room, obtained the morocco case from him—he had kept it in the small safe in his dressing-room for

me—and returning, placed it on my vanity table. Ilsa was waiting in my room for me and had unpacked the costume. All the other servants were below stairs, as was afterward proved, and the housekeeper was out.

“Before I had time to try on the costume I was called away for a moment and when I returned Ilsa was not there and my jewels were gone; the case was empty when I opened it.”

“Had you opened it before at the trust company or when you reached home?” McCarty rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “When was the last time you saw the jewels, Mrs. Creveling?”

“Just a few moments before, in my husband’s dressing-room. When he took the case from his safe for me he opened it; I remember mentioning that I meant to have the stones reset almost immediately and he tried to prevail upon me not to do so. They were very old and their antique settings appealed to his artistic sense.” She spoke in that curiously remote tone without a trace of emotion in which she had alluded to her husband during the early morning’s interview. “I snapped the case shut before I left his rooms and crossed to mine, and the jewels were most assuredly in it when I placed it on my vanity table.”

“What did you do when you found them gone and the maid, too?”

Mrs. Creveling stirred as though to rouse herself, and it was with an obvious effort that she responded:

“But you see I did not discover the loss of the jewels immediately. Ilsa returned in about five minutes with the excuse that she had gone to her own room to take a headache powder; I did not realize until I thought it over later how strangely confused she appeared. I dressed in a leisurely manner with her aid and it must have been twenty minutes at least after I returned to my room that I opened the jewel case. I must admit that her dissimulation was admirable; she seemed as astonished and concerned as the

most innocent person in her position would have been and I hesitated to accuse her, but when the detectives arrived I was compelled to tell them the exact circumstances of my loss, of course, and Mr. Creveling's testimony against her completed the evidence. He did not wish to prosecute her if she would return the emeralds, but I felt it a matter of principle to see that she was punished."

McCarty's eyes rested speculatively upon the cold beauty of the woman before him, noting the implacable lines about the perfectly chiseled lips and the stern, unwavering gaze which met his own, and he nodded to himself as though in confirmation of some unspoken thought. If Mrs. Creveling would show no quarter to a mere thief what revenge would she not take upon the murderer of her husband? With that strange pallor and the splendid lines of her immobile figure as she lay there she looked more like some marble statue of inflexible justice than a flesh-and-blood woman. Was it the "principle" alone of which she had spoken that kept her from breaking down now beneath the shock and strain, or was it some deeper motive that impelled her, deeper even than the reaction from natural grief would have been?

"What did Mr. Creveling testify to, ma'am? Just that the jewels were in the case when you took it into your own room?" McCarty asked.

"No; that was a mere corroboration of my own statement, but the door of his dressing-room was open although I do not think that Ilsa knew he had returned to the house. None of the other servants did, for he had let himself in with his key and gone directly to his apartments just a few moments before I went to him for the jewel case. After I left my rooms and went downstairs he saw Ilsa slip out with something concealed beneath her apron and go down the back stairs, not up as she had claimed; he came to his door and watched her, for the passing glimpse he had caught of her face made him curious, it was so white and strained.

He was still standing there when I returned and would have mentioned her strange demeanor to me then but he thought he heard her coming, as he explained later, so he closed his own door. I had passed on into my room without seeing him."

"He could testify, then, that none of the other servants nor anybody else had entered your rooms during your absence," McCarty commented. "I wonder, unless she was more stupid than the average, that she didn't know she'd be caught!"

Mrs. Creveling shrugged.

"I can only give you the facts, Mr. McCarty."

"She denied everything, and stuck to her story when she was accused?"

"Naturally. I cannot imagine from what source she managed to obtain the cash bail which her lawyers produced; they claim it was in a package delivered to their office boy together with typewritten anonymous instructions as to the use to which it was to be put, and the boy corroborated them, but he was unable or unwilling to describe the messenger except in such a vague and general way that his statement was practically worthless. After she was released on bail the woman simply disappeared and nothing has been heard of her or the emeralds."

"She did not have time to get them out of the house," McCarty remarked meditatively. "Was a thorough search made?"

"She had ample time to slip them to some confederate at the tradesmen's entrance," Mrs. Creveling retorted. "Yvonne had been ill for several days and Ilsa had been taking her place in attendance on me; she knew that the emeralds were in the house and that I intended to wear them that night and she had probably laid her plans well in advance and only awaited her opportunity. The house was utterly ransacked by the detectives and every one in the household submitted to a personal search. You will,

however, find all the details of the evidence in the police record of the case. I confess I cannot understand what bearing this could have upon the matter you are investigating."

Her eyelids were drooping in spite of her efforts to keep awake and McCarty rose.

"I won't trouble you any longer now, ma'am. There's just one more question I'd like to ask you; why did you go downstairs and leave the girl Ilsa there, with your jewel case on your table?"

"I must have forgotten it for the moment," Mrs. Creveling admitted drowsily. "My private telephone in my boudoir was temporarily out of commission and Rollins came to tell me that some one had called me on the one downstairs. Mr. Creveling has another private wire in his own apartments so there are extensions to the main house 'phone only in the guest rooms. Rollins went immediately into the dining-room and I heard him talking to the footman while they arranged the table for dinner, as I was returning to my apartments."

"Thank you, ma'am. I guess that about covers the information I was after." McCarty turned to her companion. "Mrs Waverly, what time did your husband telephone out to you this morning?"

Her long, narrow eyes opened but she betrayed no other sign of surprise as she replied indifferently,

"Sometime between eight and nine o'clock, I believe. I really didn't notice particularly but it was an unearthly hour."

"Did you know he was staying at the Belterre over night, ma'am?" McCarty persisted.

"Well, upon my word!" she drawled. "Am I to be cross-examined now? I must confess I do not follow you, my good man!"

McCarty reddened.

"'Tis not of importance," he said hastily. "I was just

wondering if you knew Mr. Waverly was there why you hadn't called him up earlier and told him that an accident had happened to Mr. Creveling, and Mrs. Creveling on her way in to town all alone."

"I did ~~not~~ accompany Mrs. Creveling to the city because she was ready to start when I was awakened; she did not even wait for her maid as the motor car was at the door," Mrs. Waverly explained. "Yvonne followed on the first train, and I came in on the nine-twenty."

"I see." McCarty looked around to retrieve his hat and found the little French maid at his elbow. "Thank you.—I won't be bothering either of you ladies any further now. Good afternoon, ma'am."

He was turning toward the door when Mrs. Creveling halted him with an imperious gesture.

"I have answered your questions. Have you nothing to tell me?" she asked. "Have you no clew yet to the identity of the person who took my husband's life?"

"Nothing definite, ma'am; there's hardly been time," responded McCarty. "You will hear from Mr. Terhune or us the minute there's anything known."

Out in the hall he paused, thinking that the maid would follow, but instead the door was closed behind him and he shook his head as he went downstairs. Had it been her face which he had seen peering from one of the windows above as he swung himself aboard the bus that morning? It had been so quickly withdrawn that he could not be sure, but he made up his mind to invent an excuse on his next visit to question her.

Rollins was waiting in the lower hall to show him to the door and McCarty halted once more.

"That girl Ilsa you started to tell me about; what happened to her when the jewels disappeared?" he asked. "Did Mrs. Creveling have her arrested?"

"Yes, sir, and 'eld for trial!" Rollins snorted. "It's no wonder she jumped 'er bail. She'd not 'ave 'ad a ghost of

a chance to clear 'erself with the story they 'ad against 'er, poor thing!"

"You don't think she was guilty?"

"No, sir." There was a trace of caution in the butler's tone now. "I wouldn't swear to it, of course, not 'aving any proof to the contrary, but if you ask me man to man I don't think she'd take so much as a pin. There isn't one of us as believes she did. It fair bowled Frank Hill over, for 'e was sweet on 'er and no mistake, but even though the jewels wasn't found Mrs. Creveling would 'ave it that Ilsa 'ad taken them and we all knew our place too well to open our mouths and get dismissed without a character."

"Then what became of the jewelry?" McCarty demanded.

"I don't know, sir, strike me pink!" Rollins' tone was unmistakably sincere. "None of us can figger out what 'appened to it but we was all glad when Ilsa got bail, though where it come from Gawd knows! It isn't often that a person in service 'as friends that can dig up ten thousand dollars!"

CHAPTER XI

BIRDS OF DIFFERENT FEATHER

LEAVING the Creveling house, McCarty for the second time that day boarded a south-going 'bus, having ascertained from Rollins that Mr. Nicholas Cutter lived on lower Fifth Avenue near Washington Square, and as he rode downtown he wondered somewhat grimly if further mystery were to greet him at his destination. Never had he known a case with so many conflicting elements, so many threads which led apparently nowhere, such an inextricable tangle of tantalizing suggestions and false clues. Somewhere among them, he knew, lay the solution to the enigma, but it still eluded him. Would Cutter turn out to be as much of a puzzle as the rest of them had been?

The number given him proved to be that of an old-fashioned, square mansion of brick and brownstone situated upon a corner and running back to an unusual depth upon the side street, with a high wall bordering the strip of yard which separated its extension from the house at the rear. McCarty strolled past and examined the extension with curious eyes. It resembled a conservatory, but the walls and dome were formed of thick, opaque, rubbed glass, behind which he fancied he could distinguish a network of strong, protecting wires; surely, if there were plants in there they were of extraordinary value to require such guard, and must be of some species which needed no sunlight.

The shades had been raised at all the windows of the house but they were masked by heavy lace curtains behind which some darker material hung in close folds and no sign of life appeared about the establishment.

McCarty mounted the broad steps which led to the massive front door and sounded with a vigorous hand the bronze knocker which faced him between the wide panels. Its echo crashed upon his ears like the clang of a jail gate and promptly the door swung open, revealing an elderly figure in conventional black whose faded eyes blinked rapidly in the rays of the setting sun as though unaccustomed to its light.

"Mr. Nicholas Cutter. Does he live here?" McCarty asked.

"Yes, sir." The doorway was wide but the shrunken, stoop-shouldered figure seemed consciously to fill it as McCarty made a move to step inside.

"I'd like to see him."

"I will see, sir, if he is disengaged." The servant's tone was gentle with old-fashioned courtesy rather than obsequiousness, but he still blocked the doorway. "What name, sir?"

"Timothy McCarty, though 'twill mean nothing to him. Just tell him that I'm here on a most important private matter."

"Come in, sir." The man threw the door wider and turning led the way with tottering but surprisingly quick footsteps to a second door at the side of the dim hallway. "I do not know that he will be able to see you, but I will take your message."

"Thanks," McCarty said dryly. He was accustomed to encountering effrontery, insolence and servility from the domestic staff in the homes of the rich but the formal dignity of this ancient retainer was new to his experience.

When the latter had disappeared the ex-roundsman glanced wonderingly about him. The entrance hall had been so dark that coming in from the glare of the street he had been able to make out only vaguely the outlines of enormous, oddly shaped chairs and settles and chests, the great fireplace and curving staircase with a heavily carved

balustrade, but somber as it was he had gained an impression of space and grouping, of unostentatious elegance beside which the costly luxuriousness of the Creveling house seemed tawdry and blatant in comparison.

As a boy in the old country he had once been invited together with other village children to a memorable "treat" at the castle which dominated the country and had strayed unbidden into the great hall; the one through which he had just passed would have filled barely a corner of it and yet something in its atmosphere recalled that glimpse of the splendor of long-past feudal days as nothing else in America had ever done and a sensation of awed admiration stole over him.

The little reception room into which he had been ushered seemed on the contrary to be almost bare, with its delicately carved chairs and tables, its grotesque lamps and the curiously lacquered cabinet upon the broad top of which a lone vase of washed-out-looking blue stood in solitary state. Dennis Riordan's comfortably married sister, Molly, was the only woman whom McCarty admitted to his friendship and her cluttered "parlor" was to him the epitome of cheerful good taste; give her a few dollars and she would have had that room looking like something that was meant to be lived in, yet it had an air about it, at that, although he could not have told wherein lay the distinction. Had he known that each article it contained was wellnigh priceless, that some of them—like the washed-out-looking vase—had graced the palaces of emperors long dead, and that each had a history which would have rivaled an Arabian Nights of the antiquarians he would have been duly impressed, but it would have made no difference in his personal opinion.

The old man-servant had closed the door upon him with a certain definiteness of gesture which made him hesitate to reopen it and listen but he had not long to wait. Almost immediately the former reappeared and this time he beamed upon the visitor.

"Mr. Cutter has been expecting you, sir. Come this way."

McCarty followed, dumb with astonishment, as the other led him across the hall and ceremoniously opened another door. How could the man Cutter have anticipated his coming? Was it sheer bravado or was Cutter informed by the papers of the investigation and the names of those in charge of it, and prepared to give him some facts which would help in the solution of the mystery?

As he passed over the threshold he was aware at first only of a rich, ruby glow falling on rows upon rows of exquisitely tooled books which lined the walls, tipping with gold the magnificent bronze groups that stood here and there in the vast recesses of the room and gleaming softly on warm-hued silken tapestries and mellow, deep-piled rugs into which his own heavy-soled boots sank with what seemed to him an almost profane pressure.

He started when the butler touched his arm and murmured deprecatingly: "Your hat, sir," and relinquished it with the same feeling with which he would have handed over his favorite blackthorn at the entrance to some museum.

Then all at once he was conscious of a tall, distinguished figure advancing toward him with erect, soldierly bearing, and a rich, musical, hearty voice with just a hint of amused tolerance running through it exclaimed:

"I have been awaiting you, Mr. McCarty! Take this chair and have a cigar; I think you'll find these to your taste."

As though in a daze McCarty felt the grip of a soft but vigorous hand, and found himself in the depths of a great chair with the best cigar he had ever smoked between his teeth and keen, inscrutable gray eyes smiling down at him.

"You're Mr. Nicholas Cutter, sir?" he asked when he could find his voice, and then at the other's nod he added: "You've been waiting for me? I don't get you—?"

"Your former colleague, or—er—competitor, Mr. Wade Terhune, has already paid me a call and he told me that I might expect you shortly." Mr. Cutter dropped indolently into a chair and stretched out his long, slim legs luxuriously. "I'm quite ready to tell you anything I can about our late friend Eugene Creveling."

So Terhune had been before him and left that ironic warning, knowing that it would be repeated! McCarty stifled a profane observation and his own honest blue eyes traveled in swift appraisal over his companion. He saw a man in the late forties with a dark, lean, almost ascetic face and hair just graying at the temples; a man who bore himself with the cordial but unconsciously aloof air of an aristocrat and yet about whom there appeared to be an alert tensiety as of one habitually on guard. There seemed to McCarty to be something vaguely familiar about that expression; upon whose face had he encountered it before?

"You'll excuse me for intruding on you, sir, but we've hardly any clues to work on and 'tis only through Mr. Creveling's friends and associates that we can hope to get a line on him," McCarty began at last. "We're trying to find out what motive he could have had for killing himself."

Mr. Cutter's eyebrows went up and he put the tips of his long, slender, tapering fingers together.

"So? The authorities have come to the conclusion that it was suicide? That was not the impression I gathered from Mr. Terhune."

"Mr. Terhune is a private detective, sir; a scientific criminologist, he calls himself, and a wonder he is in some respects with his little recording machines and such, but I'm a special deputy on the police force and one of the old school. Suicide the assistant medical examiner names it, and as a suicide I'm investigating the case." McCarty's tone was that of one harnessed to routine, but there was a speculative gleam in the gaze he bestowed upon his host.

Mr. Cutter shook his head.

"Of course you know your business, Mr. McCarty, and your medical expert's diagnosis ought to be conclusive, but isn't there room for doubt? I'm not actually insinuating that some one broke in and shot Mr. Creveling, but have you looked at the case from all sides?"

"If there was room for doubt that it was suicide what else are you thinking of but murder, Mr. Cutter?" McCarty demanded.

The other shrugged.

"I have formed no opinion, personally. I can no more conceive of Mr. Creveling killing himself than I can of any one wishing to take his life, yet the fact remains that he is dead from the shot of a pistol fired by his hand or that of another. If the authorities are satisfied that it is a case of suicide that is one step on the way to its solution."

"You've known Mr. Creveling a long time?"

"Since he left the university, but only casually in those earlier years. He was having his fling in the bright lights and my tastes drew me in quite another direction; it was only after his marriage and through a mutual friend that I really came into contact with him and discovered that we had an interest in common which rendered us congenial."

"And what was that interest, Mr. Cutter?" McCarty asked quickly.

"A love of the beautiful in all things: textiles, books, paintings, porcelains, sculpture. It had lain dormant in him but with me it was innate, the passion of a lifetime; he had the acquisitive zeal of a collector and I the appreciation of an hereditary possessor, but I was naturally interested in finding a kindred spirit where I had least thought to discover one. If you were a connoisseur, Mr. McCarty, you would understand what a pleasure it was to me to instruct and advise him in his choice. He made many mistakes but he was learning—he was learning. What a pity!"

"Yes, sir." McCarty agreed gravely. "Who was the mutual friend that brought you together?"

"Mr. Douglas Waverly."

"Him!" McCarty ejaculated. "And is he what you call a connoisseur, too?"

Mr. Cutter smiled with evident amusement.

"You have already interviewed him, I see.—No. Mr. Waverly is a good sportsman and a capital fellow but he has no interest in—er—antiques. However, I fear we are wasting your valuable time. As I said, I cannot conceive why Mr. Creveling should have killed himself unless—"

"Unless what?" McCarty leaned forward and his teeth clamped upon his cigar.

"I was going to say, unless he had suddenly taken leave of his senses," Mr. Cutter replied, stirring uneasily in his chair. "I would not have suggested it as a possibility but now that I have permitted myself this indiscretion I must tell you quite frankly that on several occasions of late Mr. Creveling has seemed to be rather—er—peculiar. Not exactly irrational, but he has let go, lost control of himself over the merest trifles, worked himself up into a state of ungovernable fury because of some small annoyance or difference of opinion at which he would have laughed a year ago."

"'Difference of opinion?'" McCarty repeated. "With whom, Mr. Cutter?"

"Oh, any one; I do not recall any particular instance, but it has seemed as though he had been rather going to pieces. I am telling you this in confidence; it may have been simply a case of nerves, but in the light of what has occurred and in the absence of any possible motive as far as I can imagine it may be worth looking into."

"It may that!" McCarty assented. "Do you know if any of his other friends noticed the change in him? He was here at your house last Tuesday evening, wasn't he?"

"Yes, poor chap! That is the last time I saw him alive." Mr. Cutter eyed him steadily.

"Did he show any of the temper that you've been telling me about then before the others?"

"The others?" Mr. Cutter's straight brows lifted inquiringly. "Oh, you mean my other guests of the evening?"

"Yes. Mrs. Kip and the O'Rourkes and Fords and Mr. Waverly. Did he act peculiar then?"

"I see you have quite a comprehensive list of our mutual friends." The other laughed shortly. "Mr. Creveling displayed no ill-temper, if that is what you mean, but it did occur to me that he was preoccupied and laboring under some sort of excitement."

"Was he on good terms with every one?" McCarty persisted. "Did you notice any coolness between him and one of your other guests?"

Mr. Cutter frowned.

"I did not. He appeared to be on excellent terms with himself and the world. I may be all wrong, but his eccentricities have assuredly become more marked of late and isn't it quite possible that he may have had a violent quarrel with some one over some unintentional or imaginary injury, brooded over it until the tension snapped and in a moment of temporary aberration shot himself? I realize how far-fetched such an explanation may appear to you, but I can think of no other. He had everything to live for and not an enemy in the world."

"Did he have any delusions, now? Was he a crank on any one subject that you can recall?"

"No. He was a man with more than the average self-assurance; his egotism was marked, but if that were a gauge of sanity I fancy that many of us would be in the hands of alienists!" Mr. Cutter smiled, then his face grew grave. "He was arrogant because he had been pampered and spoiled from birth, and he never seemed able to realize

that any one had a right to cross his will, but we got on wonderfully well together and his death will be a distinct loss to me, at least."

McCarty darted a swift glance at his host for although the words had been uttered with the proper decorum there was an odd note of risibility in the tone as though the speaker were secretly amused at some unvoiced thought, but Mr. Cutter's face expressed only deep concern and regret. The ex-roundsman realized that nothing further was to be gained at the present interview without showing his own hand and reluctantly dropping the stub of his cigar upon the ash-tray he got up from his chair.

"Well, sir, I'll not say the tip came from you, but I'll look into this matter of Mr. Creveling being maybe off his head. I don't mind telling you that it's the first idea I've got hold of that might bear out the medical examiner's report. Young and rich and popular and all as he was, it stands to reason that he must have been nutty to do a thing like that. By the way, Mr. and Mrs. Ford were here last night, weren't they?"

"Yes. They dined with me and we talked until an unconscionable hour. Clever fellow, Ford; one of the shrewdest operators on the street. Take a few of these cigars with you if you liked that one," Mr. Cutter invited cordially as he held out a handful. "You won't find any of the same sort in the city for they are made especially for me. Look in on me again any time you care to do so; I shall be glad to learn how your investigation is coming along."

McCarty thanked him, reclaimed his hat from the aged butler in the hall and departed. It was nearly six o'clock and the early spring dusk was settling about him as he made his way to the nearest public telephone booth and called up Dennis Riordan.

"As soon as ever I can get into my regular clothes," the latter promised. "What was that you said this morning about a dress suit?"

"You'd not be needing it to-night," McCarty chuckled. "Don't make it more than half an hour for if it's not mistaken I am, we have a job like the old times before us, Denny. I'll be at the table in the corner, waiting for you."

Ringin' off, McCarty inserted another nickel in the slot and calling Headquarters, got an eager and impatient inspector on the wire.

"Is that you, Inspector Druet?" he demanded cautiously.

"Where the devil have you been, Mac? Here I've been waiting for your report—!"

"'Twill keep, sir, at least for a while, for I've nothing definite, but I think I'm on the heels of something. You mind that party you took up this morning on suspicion?"

"Bodansky?"

"No, sir. The valet. Has he laid low or yelled for a lawyer?"

"He's standing pat. Says he'll ask for a lawyer when he needs one and seems confident we'll have to let him go for lack of evidence. I had him up on the carpet for three hours but no amount of grilling will get out of him where he was during the hours between eleven and six."

"Well, I guess he's right!" McCarty observed. "If you'll take a little tip from me, sir, you'll turn him loose."

"Turn him—!" What-t!" The wires fairly sizzled.

"Let him go, sir, at eight sharp to-night," McCarty urged. "Give him an idea that you've grand new evidence that leaves him out of the case entirely and you don't give a damn where he spent the night. Get that through his head and then throw him out, but not a minute before eight. Have you Martin there, or Yost?"

"Martin. But what have you got under your hat, Mac?"

"My head, sir, and it's a wonder 'tis still on my shoulders with all the queer dope I've been getting this day!" responded McCarty with fervor. "However, when you let our bird out have Martin on the job. I'll pick the fellow up just outside and do you tell Martin, please, sir, to trail

along after me but do nothing until I give him the sign. I may be wanting Yost later but if I do, I'll 'phone again."

"You're all wrong this trip, Mac, but I'll let you see it through." The inspector laughed meaningly. "Our bird is too wise to lead you to his covey, but when he's trailed his broken wing before you long enough, pull him in again and come down here with him. Understand? I've got something to talk over with you."

"Yes, sir," McCarty agreed noncommittally. "But until I do see you, sir, for the love of the saints keep the newspaper boys of the same opinion as the medical examiner! Don't let them know but that the case is closed as far as we are concerned and it might be a nice little diversion for them if you dropped a hint about there being insanity in the family and our late friend having showed signs of going bugs himself. Don't put it too strong, sir; a whiff is enough for them news hounds to get on the scent and 'tis being laid careful for them and for us too, if I'm not mistaken."

"I get you." There was a new note in the inspector's tone. "Your party will be under way at eight sharp."

An hour later, over a thick steak and very black coffee, McCarty recounted to the eager Dennis all that had taken place since he left him at the firehouse that morning.

"And that's the whole of it!" he summed up, waving a greasy knife comprehensively. "Every last one of them bluffing and hedging and lying like hell except the O'Rourke's, and not a soul of them knowing that they're giving themselves away with every stall they make! If it's all the one thing they're working together to keep dark, then 'tis better organized they are than Tammany itself was in the old days, but if they've each got their own private reasons—outside an aversion to notoriety—for warding off an investigation, they must be a fine bunch of crooks! There's something queer about the lot, Denny, something I don't understand. I told you the dope I got on them from Jimmie Ballard; now, leaving out my old friends the

O'Rourkes—though God only knows how they come to be mixed in that crowd!—take the Kip woman. She knew well I was no reporter but she tried to bluff it out and put over the lie that she was asleep in her bed all night and had hurt her arm by a fall. She didn't dare deny, though, that 'twas Waverly sent her the message about what had happened to Creveling because she wasn't sure of her ground, and when I sprung it on her that 'twas suicide it swept her clean off her feet; if she don't actually know it was murder she's got a mighty strong suspicion, and so have the rest of them."

"'Twas a fool move she made, quarreling with the old dame she'd hired to boost her into society," Dennis commented. "Knowing the woman had something on her she'd ought to have kidded her along to keep her mouth shut."

McCarty shook his head.

"Fool she may be, but she knew that the Frost woman wouldn't talk unless it was dragged out of her for fear that notoriety would spoil her chances with another sucker; one hint of scandal and her graft would be gone. As it was, when I put it up to her she cleaned her own skirts by blackening the other woman's. What was it that took Mrs. Kip out of her house at all hours almost against her will? Black-mail, or something like drink or dope that she couldn't keep away from? What kind of investments is her money tied up in, that she's flush one minute and broke the next?"

"Like a gambler." Dennis nodded.

"Why did she break her dates and run a chance of getting in Dutch with the very people she'd been trying to know all these years?" pursued McCarty. "Why did she keep that old leech around her at all if she knew the woman was on to her; for a cloak?—Of course, if all this has nothing to do with Creveling's death and her little game, whatever it is, doesn't come under the statutes I'm wasting time and brains on her, but to-morrow she'll come across with an alibi for last night or I'll take her downtown."

"To-morrow will be another day," Dennis remarked. "What if we had a quiet talk with her now?"

"Because we've a little date of our own downtown," retorted McCarty. "Now, there's the Fords. *She* was ready enough to talk until she let that slip about expecting to see Creveling at Cutter's house the night before, and then she looked for a minute as though she could have cut her tongue out. Why? Whatever it was, her husband was afraid of her talking, too."

"I should think when you heard him ask her if she knew, and then say that they were done for, you would have called it a day and run him in," Dennis observed.

"When the two of them had a perfectly good alibi that Cutter himself vouches for?" snorted McCarty. "Use the brains that God gave you, Denny, and don't be criticizing your betters! I'm thinking Ford's trouble was not as to *how* Creveling died, but that he *was* dead, and 'twas not grief that was consuming him, either!"

"Then what was it?" Dennis demanded, nettled at the rebuke.

"That's one of about a million questions I'm after asking myself," admitted McCarty. "The Crevelings' doctor wasn't any help, nor yet Mrs. Waverly."

"She's on to her husband's gallivanting, though, that's plain." Dennis attacked his second piece of pie with gusto. "He said he'd be at the Belterre but she was taking no chances on proving him a liar by calling up even to tell him about Creveling. She's probably got over the quarreling stage and had rather let well enough alone."

"And since when do you know anything about women?" asked McCarty with scorn. "'Tis not in reason, that she could care enough for him to be jealous but the only time a woman is not glad to have something to hang on a man is when she's in her grave. However, that's neither here nor there. Who put up that ten thousand dollars bail for the girl Ilsa? Where is she now? Who's back of her? The

jewels don't matter, but I tell you, Denny, I'd like a few words with her!"

"Let her go," advised Dennis, quite as though the elusive Ilsa were within reach of their hands. "'Tis not a thieving housemaid you're after but the man that shot Creveling."

"The man that shot him may never be found," McCarty remarked and then at his companion's stare of incredulity he added hastily: "Cutter is the smoothest proposition of them all. Of course, his alibi is as good as the Fords' since they were all together in his house, but why did he try to steer me on to the idea of insanity as the reason for Creveling's supposed suicide? Just because it was the only way to let everybody else out of responsibility, or knowing that Creveling had no motive for killing himself, did he grab that as the wool to pull over our eyes to keep us from going over to the murder theory and investigating them all?"

"But you say he's of a grand old family with money and position and all; what's he got to be afraid of in an investigation?" protested Dennis. "If Creveling was murdered and he thinks he knows who did it why should he shield him?"

"What is he doing, or the O'Rourkes, either, going around with a crowd like that?" McCarty crooked his finger at the waiter. "Mrs. Creveling was there with the family tree and so was Mrs. Waverly according to Jimmie Ballard, but they both married plain upstarts and bounders for their money as far as I can make out, and look at the rest of the lot! Mrs. Kip, a climber and God knows what else besides, the Fords as common as bog Irish and hanging on by their eyelids, and George Alexander a has-been in spats and a goatee! What is it makes them all hang together? It's not love of each other's company for there never were birds of such different feathers, Denny. What's it that binds them together? What's the game? When I've found that out I'm thinking I'll be a long way to knowing who killed Eugene Creveling."

CHAPTER XII

BOLTED DOORS

A FEW minutes before eight o'clock that evening a slouching figure strolled around the corner of a shabby street not far from the wide avenue which bordered the park and took up his stand midway the block. He leaned nonchalantly against an area railing with a cigarette hanging from his lips and his hat pushed far back on his head so that the rays from a nearby street lamp fell full upon his square-jawed but not uncomely face.

He might have been a respectable young artisan out to keep a tryst with the girl of his choice or a mere idler of the neighborhood, but there was a curious contrast between the indolence of his attitude and the covertly alert expression in the gaze which he shifted alternately from the westward corner to the precinct station house a few yards away.

The traffic of the day had ceased but the street was alive with shop-keepers and denizens of the modest flats on either side of the way, who, freed from the routine of work, were thronging out for a breath of the balmy spring air. Two figures, one tall and lanky and the other shorter and heavy-set, rounded the corner, mingling with the passers-by, and approached the youthful lounge. They passed with no sign of recognition but as soon as they had gone a few paces beyond he threw away his cigarette and sauntered off in the direction in which they had first appeared.

A short distance from the door of the station house the two newcomers halted, the taller facing it, the other with his back turned squarely.

"Loosen up, Denny, and act careless like!" warned the latter. "If you had whiskers you'd look for all the world like a cat watching a mouse hole! 'Tis well you took up fire fighting for you would never have made a first class dick!"

"Is that so!" retorted Dennis. "I mind a time when you mistook a murdering blackguard for a member of the British aristocracy—not but what the two would be a possible combination—and 'twas a blind man that beat you to the truth! How can I tell it's the right man we'll be following when he comes out of there, and me never laying eyes on him before, if I don't watch?"

"You could tell him with the tail of a glance," McCarty assured him. "He looks like a preacher that's burdened with the sins of this world and hasn't been eating regular. If I don't miss my guess he'll turn in this direction, so the minute you see him begin to talk loud but you needn't shout enough to attract his attention and don't call me 'Mac.' Just make him think you're minding your own business."

"And what'll I be talking about?" Dennis demanded in some alarm. "I'm no hand at speech—Glory be! Here he comes!"

A tall, spare figure in clerical black had appeared in the doorway of the station house and paused, gazing deliberately up and down the street. Dennis shot out a lean arm in a gesture that was intended to be argumentative.

"I'll never believe it of Terry!" he declared in a loud, indignant tone. "He's not the lad to go back on his friends and what's the good of being a citizen and having a vote if you can't swing it to them that'll put something your way later?—*He's turned this way! Now he's coming!*—As I was saying, it's the persuading tongue in his head that Terry has, all right, and the boys are with him. If he says he'll carry the ward for a friend he'll do it!"

"And if he goes around looking for a polling place in the spring of the year he's liable to be run in for a nut!"

McCarty remarked disgustedly, for Frank Hill had passed them and was striding toward the Avenue. "'Tis a fine subject you picked for your discourse, but come on; I think I know where our bird is headed for but he's only calling the inspector's bluff and playing safe."

With one accord they turned and started off in the wake of that deliberate figure ahead and as they passed the corner the slouching youth reappeared from nowhere and trailed along unobtrusively in the rear.

After that first comprehensive glance about him Hill did not even look back, but walked on as though lost in thought yet with a definite objective in view. He crossed an intersecting avenue or two and then, on reaching the fashionable thoroughfare on the farther side of which rose the park wall, he turned north.

"Where's he making for?" muttered Dennis.

"Where would any faithful employee be going when he's freed from being under an unjust suspicion but back to the place where he works?" McCarty returned. "I told you he'd play safe. 'Tis the Creveling house, no less, that he's headed for now and there it is just ahead."

They slackened their pace and were a full block behind when Hill stopped at the tradesmen's entrance of the white stone house and pulled out his key. Flattening themselves in the shadow of the same cornice beneath which McCarty had effaced himself when he trailed the embryo burglar on the previous night they saw him unlock the door and disappear within.

"And now what?" Dennis demanded. "Here comes Martin; are you going to leave him to watch the place?"

"There's a blank wall that surrounds the yard space at the rear like a well with never a door nor an opening that a man could crawl through as far as I could see this morning, but I'm taking no chances," McCarty responded. "The houses on both sides of the Crevelings are closed but there might be a way he could get out, at that.—Martin!" he

added as the detective from headquarters approached. "Go back a couple of blocks, cross the avenue and climb over the park wall; creep along the other side of it till you are just opposite the Creveling house—'tis that white one there in the middle of the next block—and watch both doors. You got a good look at Hill?"

"Sure; down at headquarters to-day, when the chief was hauling him over the coals," Martin replied. "Me and Yost both give him the once-over. He ain't ever been mugged, I could swear to that."

"Well, keep your eyes peeled and if he comes out again give a squeeze to this and then trail him." From beneath his coat McCarty produced an object not unlike a small motor horn and handed it to the other. "If he don't come out stay where you'll be till you hear two quick honks of a horn like that one, or we join you, if it's morning. Understand?"

"Right, Mac." Martin grinned at Denny. "The chief thought your side kick here would be with you. I could tell a mile off, Riordan, that you were on the job!"

He walked off chuckling at Dennis' discomfiture and McCarty remarked consolingly:

"Never you mind, Denny, every man to his work and it's your own line you'll be following to-night."

"'My own line'?" Dennis repeated. "You're not thinking of starting a fire, are you, Mac?"

"No, but there may be a bit of wall-scaling to be done and you're the lad for it. 'Tis a hard place to reach, though, and I've no mind to be nabbed by pig-headed householders for breaking and entering. Clancy ought to happen along soon on his beat and we'll wait for him."

"But why would this fellow Hill go back to the house first if he's got something else on his mind?" Dennis was disposed to argument. "There's little Creveling needs of a valet now."

"For an alibi; he'll not be caught again without one,"

McCarty replied. "It was a woman's voice, you know, that telephoned out to the Waverly country place, and I'm thinking that 'tis maybe because of a woman that Hill won't open his mouth about where he was last night."

"It might not be the same woman, though," Dennis suggested helpfully. "Perhaps the woman that 'phoned was put up to it by the man that killed Creveling."

"The one that killed Creveling put nobody else up to doing any of the dirty work, Denny," McCarty said after a pause. "'Twas a lone hand that was played last night; the hand that held the pistol. Whoever did the 'phoning found out about it somehow, and was playing a different game.—There's Clancy, now, coming out of that areaway and wiping the mouth of him on the back of his hand! The Force is not what it used to be when I was pounding my beat!"

"How're they coming, boys?" Clancy greeted them with a cheerful grin. "Thought you'd be somewhere around, Mac, and I might have known Riordan would be with you. I know as well as you do that 'twas no suicide last night but I'm glad the inspector took it out of my hands; it'll be a hard nut to crack!"

"We've been waiting for you, Clancy." McCarty spoke without preamble. "From what we observed just now you seem to be on good terms with the help in the houses along here; couldn't you get the cook in one of those on the next block to let us go through and into their back yard? We'll probably be wanting to come out the same way along about morning, but if we don't there'll be nothing to kick up a racket about. It'll be just as well, though, if you pick out one that don't know the servants at the Crevelings'."

"Sure, that's easy!" Clancy exclaimed. "Getting you through, I mean. As to keeping it from the help at the Crevelings', the cook at the de Forests' two doors away had a run-in with that Sarah, the butler's wife, and she won't speak to any of them. Her and me are real friendly and

many's the hot cup of coffee she's given me on the cold nights this past winter. She'll let you through on my say-so."

The de Forests' cook proved to be a buxom, good-natured person and Dennis unexpectedly scored a hit by ascertaining that she came from the same county as he in the old country. They took leave of Clancy and she led them through the kitchen and scullery out to an immaculate asphalted yard, its low fences covered with stout wisteria vines just feathering into bloom.

"If it's over the walls you want to go, man dear, there's a small, little ladder here that'll hold the two of you one at a time, and you can pull it up after you and let it down the other side," she suggested. "You'll get no interference from next door for the house is closed and beyond is the one where the poor gentleman killed himself last night. 'Tis some one in one of the side street houses that you've a warrant for, isn't it?"

McCarty nodded.

"Well, you'll find the fences easy; it's a good thing for you that it is not the Creveling house you want to get into for 'tis blockaded at the rear like a fort, though heaven knows why. 'Twas some whim, maybe, of the poor soul that sent a bullet through his own heart.—And to think," she added with a trace of awe in her tones, "I heard the very shot!"

"You did!" McCarty dropped his end of the ladder and beamed upon her. "If the reporters knew that I suppose they'd be after you like flies around honey! And how do you know 'twas that shot you heard? What time was it?"

"At quarter of two in the morning. I know, for my family, the de Forests, had come home awhile before from a dance and waked me up; we've a houseparty of young folks and the noise they made saying 'good night' would have roused the saints! I got up and looked at my clock and I was just climbing back into bed again when I heard

a bang like the roof was coming off! I waited but nothing else happened and I made up my mind a policeman must have shot a stray dog over in the park. It was only when the papers came out this afternoon that I learned what it really was."

"Did any one else in the house hear it, too?" McCarty asked.

"No; at least, none of the help did and the butler and footmen said that the family talked about nothing else at dinner and somebody said 'twas funny that the shot wasn't heard.—I'll be up until near midnight writing letters in the servants' dining-room in the front basement if you're coming back this way, and I've no doubt I can find a bit of supper for you," she continued hospitably.

They thanked her and when she had withdrawn into the house Dennis asked:

"Well, Mac, what's the game now?"

"Let's get over in the next yard and pull the ladder with us," responded McCarty. "I want to have a look at the rear of the closed house."

They scaled the fence without difficulty and depositing the ladder in the grass plot of the second yard they turned to reconnoiter.

"Do you think, Denny, that you could get up to one of the window sills on the third floor? You could see over the Crevelings' wall then."

"Do I think I could walk up a pair of stairs with my eyes shut?" retorted Dennis. "If 'twas for that you dragged the ladder along, you can hoist it back again where it belongs. With them sills and lintels sticking out the way they do, a small boy could reach the roof!"

Without further speech he shed his coat and hat and began to clamber up as agilely as a monkey while McCarty watched from below in a solicitude that was almost ludicrously maternal. At length he reached the third floor and perching himself on a broad window ledge, peered over the

high wall into the blind alley at the rear of the Creveling house.

"What do you see?" McCarty demanded in a hoarse whisper.

"Nothing," responded Dennis laconically. "'Tis as bright as day, for the light is streaming out from the windows at the back and the court, or whatever it is, is as bare as the palm of your hand."

"Do you see no sign of an opening?"

"There's a back door to the house, but it's closed tight." Dennis leaned over and craned his neck downward. "If it's in the wall you mean, there's not so much as a loose brick. Is that all you wanted to know?"

He prepared to descend but McCarty halted him.

"Not by a long shot, it isn't! You'll stay where you are, Denny, my lad, until something happens or we're sure that it won't, and you'd best be making yourself comfortable for it's likely there'll be a long wait ahead of you. 'Tis barely nine o'clock now."

And a long wait it proved to be. Dennis shifted about from time to time but stuck faithfully at his post and McCarty paced back and forth upon the narrow strip of sod which lined the fence. An hour passed, then another, and the lights in the rear of the neighboring houses began to go out, one by one, but still there came no muffled honk from the horn which McCarty had given to Martin and no sign from the watcher above.

The back of the Creveling house had long since been dark and no sound issued from it. McCarty began to feel an inward misgiving. Had his train of reasoning been at fault? There was so much to be done, so many loose threads to be gathered up in this strange tangle of events. Was he wasting precious time? Had he allowed himself to be turned aside from the main issue by the chance hint of a gossiping servant while the real slayer of Eugene Creveling escaped?

He told himself miserably that he should have had them watched, the whole lot of them! Mrs. Waverly and Mrs. Creveling were out of it, and the O'Rourke's were not even to be considered, but anything could be expected from the rest of them! Even that alibi of the Fords might have been cooked up between them and Cutter, though what common interest they all had in blocking the investigation—

"Whisht!" A sibilant command from Dennis broke in upon McCarty's pessimistic meditation and brought him up standing. "There's a light just flashed up for a minute in the third floor window nearest the farther wall! You'd have seen it yourself if you'd not been sleep-walking! Look up! There it is again!"

McCarty was already straining his eyes up into the darkness and now he saw a tiny pin point of light gleam out over the wall from the direction of the window indicated, sweep across space like a streak of distant lightning and vanish.

"Pocket electric torch!" he ejaculated softly, prancing in the sudden excitement of renewed hope. "What's going on, Denny? I can't see through a brick wall—!"

"For the love of God, stop your hawering!" came from above in a fierce, far-carrying whisper and McCarty subsided, mentally cursing the increasing girth and lack of physical practice which prevented him from reaching the point of vantage held by his companion. He had not long to remain in suspense, however, for almost immediately the silence of the night was broken by the sound of a window being stealthily raised.

Dennis gesticulated violently and then shrank back into the concealment of the overhanging lintel while McCarty gazed breathlessly but impotently upward.

There came a curious scratching noise which seemed to be receding; the light flashed again fainter than before and then came the sound of a soft thud. In an instant Dennis' long arms and legs writhed out of the shadows and he

scrambled down with perilous haste to land at McCarty's feet.

"Some one—a man—got out of that window, straddled the wall and climbed down the back of that next house!" he exclaimed. "He'll be off across fences to the next street north and we'll lose him!"

"Like hell we will!" McCarty seized the despised ladder and setting it against the fence of the de Forests' yard he swarmed up it and hanging by his hands, dropped with a grunt to the ground. Dennis was after him in a twinkling and they tore through the scullery and kitchen, nearly bowling over the astonished cook who met them in the front hall.

Without a word to her they dashed out into the areaway and once on the avenue McCarty paused only to produce his horn and sound it twice before he set out on a run for the northern corner.

The street was deserted save for the solitary figure of a man walking rapidly eastward far down the block, and without wasting speech or looking backward for their ally they took up the trail.

It proved to be a straight one for several blocks and the two following in the shadows exercised all the more caution for that, but the man appeared to have no suspicion of their espionage. Intent only upon his errand the rapidity of his stride increased until he all but broke into a run, but at Third Avenue he halted abruptly.

"If he picks up a taxi by any chance of dumb luck we're lost!" McCarty panted. "There'd not be but one night hawk along this way before dawn!"

But no taxi appeared and the car tracks stretched away blankly into the darkness. After waiting irresolutely for a minute or two the man turned south and started off once more with his quick, nervous stride and McCarty and Dennis trailed along but more cautiously still, for now their quarry glanced constantly back over his shoulder.

He was almost two blocks ahead when he halted again at the curb, and at the same moment there came to their ears the hum and rattle of a car approaching from behind. Without giving himself time to think McCarty sprang out into the middle of the avenue and swung aboard the car as it passed, while Dennis clung tenaciously to the upright bar, heedless of the profanity of the outraged conductor, and succeeded in scrambling up, narrowly missing a pillar of the elevated railway structure.

McCarty had already produced two nickels and they made their way to the forward part of the car, seating themselves with hunched shoulders turned to the entrance.

"That was a narrow squeak!" breathed Dennis. "We've lost Martin now if ever he was trailing behind. 'Twill be a fine note if the car don't stop for your man, Mac, or if he changes his mind!"

"If you borrowed money the way you borrow trouble, Denny, you'd not have a friend left in the world," McCarty observed. "The car's slowing down now, and as for Martin I never knew him to get left yet!"

The car did indeed stop at the second corner, and as it resumed its way Dennis could not resist a swift glance over the few passengers behind.

"It's Hill, all right!" he announced in a sepulchral whisper. "He's dropped into a seat by the rear door and he looks like the ghost of himself! Something must have happened him, the night, since he went back to the Creveling house!"

"'Tis what's on the mind of him, more like," surmised McCarty grimly.

"You think 'twas him killed—?"

"I do not!" McCarty interrupted. "If I did I'd have my two hands on him now, and well you know it! Don't look around again till you hear the buzzer."

To Dennis' edged nerves the ride downtown seemed interminable. Twice the buzzer sounded and twice his eyes

nearly crossed in the haste and eagerness of his backward glance, but Hill still slumped in his seat with his head drooping over upon his breast.

"Is it to the Bowery he's going?" he muttered after the second disappointment. "No wonder he stood looking for the car! 'Tis a fine walk we'd have had—!"

"Are you a cripple?" demanded McCarty. "We're not even to Thirty-fourth Street yet, and 'tis not a fire we're going to, you know!—There goes the buzzer again."

"And it's him! He's reaching up with his finger on the button!" Dennis made as if to rise, but McCarty laid a heavy hand on his knee.

"Sit still and let your head fall over as if you were asleep!" he ordered. "The fellow's got to pass us to get out front. Don't move till I say the word!"

The two relaxed figures apparently lost in slumber were not calculated to arrest the eye of a fellow passenger making for the exit and Frank Hill's glance did not even include them as he passed and descended from the car. As it started again Dennis straightened and looked quickly out of the window.

"He didn't cross the tracks; he's heading west," he observed. "After coming all this way are we going to ride on—?"

But McCarty had risen and sounded the buzzer in his turn and when the car halted again at the next corner they literally flung themselves off. Frank Hill was nowhere in sight and the avenue itself seemed utterly deserted.

"There, you see!" exclaimed Dennis disgustedly as they hurried back to the street at which the valet had alighted. "I told you we'd lose him! If you'd have listened to me—there's no one at all in the side street either way."

For answer McCarty stopped abruptly at the corner and pointed through the glass show window of the all-night drugstore, the lights of which were the only oases in the desert of darkness about them. Hill was standing at the

cigar counter engaged in conversation with the weary-eyed clerk and it was evident that they were old acquaintances.

Dennis and McCarty had only time to withdraw into a neighboring doorway when Hill reappeared and rounding the corner started briskly westward. The others followed just in time to see him almost collide with a second figure which had been lurking in the deeper shadows of a high stoop. Both sidestepped instantly and Hill continued his way, but though he walked faster even than before his shoulders hunched forward despondently, almost furtively, and a certain elasticity seemed gone from his stride.

"Martin!" McCarty swore beneath his breath as the figure approached them sheepishly. "So 'twas you pulled that bonehead play! You're a disgrace to the Force!"

"However in the world did you get here?" Dennis demanded, adding with sly satisfaction: "You've scared off our bird, all right! Any one could tell a mile off, Martin, that you were on the job!"

"I rode down on the same car with you, on the fender at the back," Martin responded, chagrined. "How was I to know he'd run into me like that? It's just the luck of the game. Shall I trail him, Mac? Maybe that clerk in the drugstore is a kind of a go-between in whatever business brought him out and he's finished what he came for. He's certainly walking as though he was through in this neighborhood."

"And good reason!" McCarty commented. "However, 'tis no good palavering over. Trail him, Martin, but if he starts uptown on a car or in a taxi he'll be on his way back to the Creveling house with nothing more doing to-night as far as he is concerned, so you come back here. I'm going to see what that clerk knows about him."

The abashed Martin hurried off upon his task and Dennis and McCarty retraced their steps to the drugstore, where the latter purchased three of the most expensive cigars in the case and remarked casually as he lighted one:

"Thought I saw a fellow in here that I know just now as we were passing; tall, thin fellow, dark, with a smooth face—"

"Oh, you mean Mr. Hildreth?" the clerk interrupted pleasantly. "He and his wife live just around the corner and they trade here a lot."

McCarty removed his foot hastily from the agonizing pressure of Dennis' big brogan and nodded.

"That's my friend, all right, but he can't have lived in the neighborhood long. They used to have a flat up on the West Side. Mrs. Hildreth is a mighty fine-looking woman, big and blonde—"

"She's a fine woman every way!" the clerk interrupted again, his tired face lighting up with a smile. "They've only lived around in Lanahan's apartments a little more than a month, but it's easy to tell. She don't come in often herself but she's always got a kind word about the children," he added irrelevantly. "I lost my own wife a year ago."

"Tough luck!" McCarty said sympathetically. "I'll drop in on the Hildreths one of these evenings. Which apartment house is Lanahan's?"

"Fifth from the corner; got a cracked yellow lamp over the vestibule, you can't miss it."

"Thanks. I'll look in on you again when I'm down this way. Good night."

Out on the street once more, McCarty and Dennis made their way to the house indicated without delay and halted in the vestibule while the former scrutinized the cards in the bell plate.

"Here they are. Fourth floor," he observed. "If Mrs. Hildreth is the dame I think she is, she'll not be answering a ring at this time of night."

"There'll be no need, for some one's left the door unlatched." Dennis pushed it open as he spoke. "You can make some excuse to get her to let us in. Come on!"

In silence they mounted the creaking stairs, through an atmosphere redolent of stale cooking, to the fourth floor, and paused before the rear door upon which had been tacked a card bearing the name "F. Hildreth," written in a small, neat hand.

"I guess the front flat is empty, for there's no card up and there was none in that space over the bell downstairs," Dennis whispered. "What are you going to do, Mac? Take a chance and break the door down?"

"Not if I can get in peaceable," McCarty replied in a whisper. "I'm going to be real sick, Dennis. Hold me up!"

Emitting a loud and realistic groan, he leaned limply against his friend with such suddenness that the surprised Dennis was almost borne to the floor, but he recovered himself in time. Another groan welled from McCarty's throat and a third before finally there came the sound of footsteps within, the door was opened cautiously and a woman peered out. She was tall and Junoesque in form with a thick braid of fair hair falling over either shoulder and great, soft, blue eyes darkened now with apprehension and concern. Her loose, dark robe fell in almost classical lines about her and the light of the flaring gas jet in the hall gleamed softly on her creamy throat.

Dennis gasped with astonishment and involuntary admiration at the vision and stepped back while the woman asked with just a trace of an accent:

"What is it? Some one is ill?"

McCarty straightened and his foot reached out to the door sill.

"I want you, Ilsa Helwig—!"

But he was too late. At his first word a sudden change came over her expression. Before his foot could intercept it she had slammed the door in his face and they heard a bolt shoot into its slide.

"We've got to work fast now; down with the door!"

McCarty cried and Dennis lunged, using his brawny shoulder as a battering-ram, at the same moment that the sound of a subdued crash came from within. At first the stout bolt resisted their efforts, but finally it snapped with a loud report, precipitating them into a narrow, dimly lighted hallway. Two doors facing them stood open revealing their emptiness at a glance, but a third at the back was closed and they rushed toward it. It was bolted, as the entrance door had been, but its flimsy fastening gave way at the first onslaught and they found themselves in a tiny kitchen. No other door led from it, but its single window was wide open, a fire-escape showing beyond and a row of flowering geraniums lay overturned, their red earthen pots shattered.

At a bound they had crossed the room and craned their necks out into the night. Lights were springing up in one or two of the rear windows across the network of clothes-lines, but no human figure was visible on the fire-escape nor in the yard beneath.

"Well," vouchsafed Dennis after a pause in which an eloquent glance had passed between them. "I hope the next time you tell any one they're wanted you'll have your hands on them first! Martin did not make the *only* bonehead play, the night!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE CURSE OF SCOTLAND

THE "Hildreth" flat consisted only of four small rooms and bath, the latter evidently converted from a clothes closet, and McCarty and Dennis searched them thoroughly but found no trace of the woman. The quick, double honk of a motor horn in the street below came to their ears as they were on the point of departure and they descended to find a crowd of excited tenants gathered in the halls and on the stairs, with a blue-coated officer pushing his way through the throng.

"Get back, there! It's all right, there's no trouble. It was just a bit of a row but it's over now and no one hurt." The policeman winked broadly up at McCarty on the stairs and then addressed the jabbering crowd once more. "Get back where you belong and quit making a disturbance or I'll send for the wagon and run you all in!—Come down, sir."

He led them out into the vestibule and slammed the door after him.

"Detective Sergeant Martin tipped me off," he whispered. "You're former Roundsman McCarty, sir?"

"Yes. Special deputy now under Inspector Druet," McCarty explained briefly. "Woman on the fourth floor, rear, under the name of Hildreth is wanted downtown and we almost had her but she got away on the fire-escape. Take Martin and search the yards and the roofs and if you find no trace of her leave him on guard in the flat until he's relieved. Report by telephone to Inspector Druet at Headquarters."

"Right, sir," the policeman replied with immense respect. "What's the Hildreth woman like?"

Before McCarty could answer Martin entered the vestibule.

"Hill walked clear over to Fifth Avenue and waited all this time for a 'bus," he announced. "He's just started uptown and I came back according to your instructions, Mac, but you were nowhere around and I couldn't keep on sounding this horn! All at once Hell broke loose here in the house and I figured you were in it, somehow."

McCarty explained gruffly, adding a description of the "Hildreth" woman, and Martin whistled.

"The Helwig girl to a T!" he exclaimed. "And that valet—so that's how the land lays! We'll find her if she's on the block!"

After a few final orders McCarty, with Dennis in tow, returned to the drugstore and nodding to the surprised clerk he entered the telephone booth and called up Police Headquarters. A long ten minutes elapsed before he reappeared, red and perspiring, and said in a hurried undertone to his companion:

"Yost is on his way up to the Creveling house as fast as the inspector's own car can take him. He's to find out if Hill is there and stand guard over him."

"But why?" Dennis spoke cautiously out of the side of his capacious mouth. "Why don't he run him in again and bring him up before the magistrate to-morrow to be held for trial? You've got a clear charge against him now of aiding and abetting that woman to jump her bail; that's what the legal sharks call it."

"Instead, if it's not too late for the first editions, the inspector is going to see that every morning newspaper carries the word that he's been released for lack of evidence and is back at the Creveling house," McCarty responded. "Yost will be there to see that he don't get out again or send any messages and to trace and report any 'phone calls that may come for him."

"I get you!" A light broke over Dennis' face. "You

think the woman will maybe try to reach him there when she learns that he's out again and back on his job?"

McCarty nodded.

"She doesn't know that he's been in the neighborhood here to-night, nor that he led us straight to her. He'll keep on believing that she's safe enough and think we're only guarding him on his own account." He turned to the clerk who was watching them with curious eyes. "What are your hours here?"

"Eight to eight," the latter replied, still staring.

"Where do you live?"

"Right up over the store. The janitor's wife takes care of my four kids but I wouldn't feel easy about 'em if they weren't here in the same building with me.—Say, who are you fellows, anyway? It seems to me you're asking a lot of questions around here—!"

"And I'm liable to be asking a lot more!" McCarty interrupted grimly. "We're from Police Headquarters, if you want to know."

"'Police—!'" The clerk gripped the edge of the showcase. "Those—those Hildreths—?"

"Have you been on every night this week?" McCarty interrupted.

"Y-yes, sir!"

"Is there any other public telephone booth in the neighborhood?"

"None any place that keeps open all night." The clerk seemed to be gathering his dazed faculties.

"Do you have many calls from here between midnight and early morning?"

The clerk shook his head.

"Not unless somebody's sick."

"Did anybody come in here and use that 'phone last night?"

"Certainly; a lot of people early in the evening, but after midnight!" He paused and his eyes widened. "No one

came in here to 'phone after that until—until half-past four in the morning."

"Who was that?" McCarty asked sharply. "Some one from the neighborhood that you know?"

"It was Mr. Hildreth! I was surprised, for he looked very bad and I thought that he must be sick and have come in for some medicine, but he said that he only wanted to use the 'phone. He went in the booth and closed the door and I didn't hear what number he called, but it must have been a city one for he was only in there a minute. When he came out he looked so pale that I thought he was going to keel over and I offered him a bracer—er—just a heart stimulant, of course. I fixed him up a dose with a dash of strychnine in it and it seemed to pull him together. He said he had been out of town on a business matter and traveling all night to get back; that his train should have been in at midnight but was delayed and he had to 'phone to his partner at the earliest possible moment. It did strike me as funny that he hadn't telephoned from the station if it was as important as all that, but I didn't say so. I was kind of sleepy, and it wasn't any business of mine. He hurried off home and I settled down for a nap in my chair behind the cash register."

"Did you see him again before he came in to-night?"

"No." The clerk hesitated. "I don't know what you've got against the Hildreths and I'd hate to get them into any trouble for they've been good customers here and pleasant to deal with. I'd never believe a word against Mrs. Hildreth, anyway."

"You said that she didn't come in here often." McCarty eyed him quizzically. "When did you see her last?"

There was a pause and then the clerk replied with evident reluctance:

"Early this morning."

"How early?"

"I suppose I'd better tell you; you fellows would find out,

somehow! It was just before five, less than half an hour after her husband left. I told you I'd settled down for a nap; well, I was roused by the bell that rings whenever the door is opened and looked up to see Mrs. Hildreth come in. She's always as neat as wax, but this morning she looked as though she had just thrown on her clothes every which way, and she seemed excited, too, about something. She asked in that soft foreign voice of hers if she could use the telephone, and it must have been an out-of-town call this time for she was in the booth nearly twenty minutes and I heard money rattle in the slot two or three times. She thanked me when she came out but didn't try to explain about the call the way her husband had about his." He paused and added: "I'll tell you one thing I think, sir; whatever it was that happened to make her husband look more dead than alive it certainly put new life into her! She walked out of the store as though she was treading on air!"

McCarty frowned thoughtfully. He had found confirmation of his suspicions from a totally unexpected quarter and one of the minor mysteries of the case was cleared up, but it led him no nearer to the truth; rather by its very nature it raised complexities which he had not hitherto considered.

"We may want you," he said at last. "What is your name?"

"Willis Udell, and you'll find me here or in the flat over the shop any time you want me!" the clerk declared. "I've done nothing to be afraid of you fellows for, nor said a word I can't stick to, but I hope you are mistaken about the Hildreths."

He shook his head lugubriously after them as they left the shop and when the door had closed behind them Dennis, too, drew a deep breath.

"Well, that settles the two 'phone calls, anyway," he commented. "The whole thing is as plain as the nose on your face, Mac! The man that killed Creveling was—"

"He was not in that shop this night!" McCarty interrupted impatiently. "Come on till we hop a car and you'll hear what the inspector has to say about it! He's waiting for us downtown."

But when they presented themselves at Headquarters Inspector Druet appeared to be very much of the same mind as Dennis. McCarty told the whole story of the night's vicissitudes, sparing himself not at all in the recital for permitting the woman known as "Mrs. Hildreth" to escape, but the inspector did not censure him. Instead he listened thoughtfully until the end and then brought his hand down resoundingly on the desk before him.

"That is about the last link we needed in the chain of evidence, I think!" he declared. "We'll clean this case up in record time now, Mac. Don't worry about the woman; she won't get away from us again now that we know she is in the city, and Yost has 'phoned that Hill is back in the Creveling house. He's camped outside the fellow's door now."

"Did you hear anything from Martin, sir?"

"No, but the officer on the beat up there on Third Avenue called up to say that he'd followed your instructions, but no trace of the woman was found. Martin's watching the flat, and I'll see that both he and Yost are relieved in the morning by the most reliable men connected with the bureau. We'll wait a bit to see if the woman tries to communicate with Hill and then gather him in."

"On a charge of murder, sir?" McCarty's tone was respectfully inquiring, but there was a skeptical quality in it that made the inspector raise his eyebrows.

"Of course! We've got the motive now. I thought before that it might have had something to do with blackmail, but it's revenge. He's infatuated with the girl and whether she's guilty or not she is facing a long term in prison, for the evidence against her together with the fact that she jumped her bail would make any jury in the coun-

try convict her without leaving the box. Remember, it was Creveling's testimony before the magistrate which was most damaging to her, proving it to have been virtually impossible for any one else to have taken the jewels. I suppose she and Hill both held it against Creveling and we can't tell the details yet of what happened last night, but they must have had a violent quarrel for the man to have shot his employer."

"Wait one second, sir," McCarty interposed quietly. "I didn't start working on this case to-night when I first telephoned to you, but from the minute you took me on, and there's a lot you haven't heard yet. Some of it would seem to point to Hill being guilty, but there's more that he couldn't have had a hand in, and 'tis beyond reason that all those society folk would put themselves out to shield him."

"Shield him?" repeated the inspector with a frown. "What do you mean? What society folk, Mac?"

"The whole kit and boodle of them!" McCarty waved his hand expressively. "All the Crevelings' friends except the O'Rourkes! They're every one lying or trying to hide something and hold out on us, or I'm a Dutchman!—But there's one thing: Hill was in the house long before he showed himself at the door of the breakfast room, and when you and me were going through the rooms upstairs and you laughed at me, sir, for seeing and hearing things, I was! If I'm not mistaken, 'twas Hill I heard down in Creveling's room when we were up in the servants' quarters and Hill's shadow I saw on the stairs."

He told in detail of his second and solitary search of the rooms upstairs and the discovery that the desks in Creveling's room and that of the housekeeper had been tampered with since their first examination, and Inspector Druet nodded emphatically.

"That only makes it more certain, Mac. We won't have much trouble in sending Hill to the chair!"

"Maybe not, sir," McCarty acquiesced noncommittally.

"Did you find that pair of gloves on him that I asked you to look for when you got him down here?"

"They were taken from his coat pocket at the station house and that's another strong bit of evidence against him, for they are stained and reeking with oil.—Oil from the pistol that killed Creveling!"

"Perhaps the same kind of oil that was used to clean the gun if it was Creveling's own, sir, and the can left lying around handy," McCarty suggested. "The oil might have been used on those desk locks. Anyway, what has the girl Ilsa and the jewels to do with a playing card?"

He produced the bloodstained nine of diamonds and laid it before his chief.

"Where the devil did you get this, Mac?"

"Under the edge of the strip of cover on the table right beside where the body was lying, sir." McCarty explained the circumstances and added: "If Hill fired that shot, whatever would he be doing with that lone card, and why would George Alexander be in league with him? Didn't you see the looks that passed between them and the way they tried to get away for a quiet word together? The old man wants to keep something dark, and 'tis not to save Hill from punishment for murdering his own partner and meal ticket!"

"No. It was to prevent notoriety, if anything," the inspector remarked. "You must have noticed how ready he was to accept the suicide theory which he had first rejected, when he saw to what lengths his niece was prepared to go to learn the truth. If he doesn't actually know of any scandal in Creveling's immediate past he must suspect it, and rather than have it unearthed, as it was bound to be if we hadn't so promptly discovered the identity of the murderer, he preferred to let sleeping dogs lie."

"So do the rest of them, it seems! Wait, sir, till you hear."

McCarty gave the gist of his interviews with Douglas Waverly, Mrs. Kip, Miss Frost, the Fords and Nicholas

Cutter, but when he had concluded the inspector shook his head.

"Whatever reasons they may have for holding out on you as you suspect, Mac, it isn't because of a guilty knowledge of the murder. By your own showing the Fords, Cutter and Waverlys have established alibis which no possible circumstantial evidence could shake, and you haven't a thing to connect Mrs. Kip with the affair. You can take what that ex-chaperone of hers said about her with a grain of salt; the old woman was mad enough at being sent packing to have sworn Mrs. Kip's life away, I'll wager, and at that she could tell nothing incriminating. You'll find that Mrs. Kip's little mystery, whatever it may be, is her own affair."

"Well, sir, 'tis your case and you know best." McCarty rose. "I've had no sleep since night before last and 'tis getting on to morning. If so be you've no further instructions for me now I'll go home and rest and be on the job again bright and early."

Inspector Druet laughed somewhat uneasily.

"Which means that I haven't convinced you and you've taken the bit in your teeth again! I've no instructions for you, only suggestions; you know well that I have always given you your head in every case you've worked on with me since you resigned from active duty and I've never regretted it, especially the last instance, Mac!" His face sobered. "Go ahead your own way and if you can prove to me that I'm wrong I'll be only too glad to acknowledge it, but I tell you now that you haven't a chance! The guilty man—"

"Does that mean, sir, that you won't take in Hill right away?" McCarty interrupted quickly.

"No. We can afford to wait a bit and I told you we would do so to see if the woman tried to communicate with him; we might as well kill two birds with one stone and we've proof now that she was an accessory both before and

after the fact. We'll give her two or three days to try to get in touch with him and I'll notify you, anyway, before we decide to rearrest him."

"Thanks, sir." McCarty picked up the nine of diamonds from the desk. "If you don't mind I'll be taking this along, and by the way, if you run across Mr. Douglas Waverly, take a look at his cigarette case; 'twill be worth your while."

The inspector started slightly.

"You don't mean—? See here, Mac, has that observation of yours anything to do with the cigarettes that we found on the supper table and that piece of a broken amber holder?"

"Not that I know of, sir, but 'tis thin and shaped like this playing card here and there are nine diamonds stuck in it; nine real diamonds arranged just like the spots on this card."

This time Inspector Druet's laughter was frank and hearty.

"You've still got your eyes out for something dramatic, haven't you? We're not living in dime novel times, Mac, and that card doesn't mean anything. It might have been lying on the floor there in the study for days; you saw yourself that the house hasn't been kept any too orderly since Mrs. Creveling has been away. Hill may have noticed it spattered with blood after he killed Creveling and slipped it under the table cover without thinking; a man is usually dazed after a crisis like that and apt to do a lot of meaningless things in a mechanical sort of way as the records of the department show. You'll find there's some such simple explanation of it and as for Waverly's cigarette case—! I suppose it's no use to talk to you, though. You'll be seeing nines of diamonds wherever you look until Hill goes to trial!"

McCarty's expression did not change as he slipped the card into his pocket once more.

"I'd like to see the rest of the pack this came from," he vouchsafed imperturbably. "Denny and I'll be getting on, then, sir. You'll hear from me if anything turns up."

The ride back uptown to McCarty's room was a long and tedious one and the conversation between the two friends of a merely desultory nature, for Dennis was frankly sleepy and McCarty felt the reaction from the excitement of the chase. An unusual depression overshadowed his natural buoyancy of spirit and he was too fatigued mentally and physically to combat it.

The escape of the girl, Ilsa, from beneath his very hands had been bad enough, but the stand the inspector had taken in the case added ten-fold to the difficulties before him and he could see no way out. Not for a moment would he accept the theory of Hill's guilt, despite the circumstantial evidence against him; slowly and almost without conscious reasoning an idea had been forming in his mind ever since he stood beside that disordered supper table and nothing he had learned since had tended to eradicate it. Now with little added in support of it, it was gradually strengthening into conviction, albeit a vague and still obscure one.

"I'll go on back to the dormitory at the fire-house," Dennis announced as they left the car at last. "'Tis too late to be breaking into my room at Molly's for that youngster of hers sleeps with both the ears of him wide open for fear he'll miss something and he'd scream fit to wake the dead. I'm on duty from nine to six again to-morrow and then off for twenty-four hours, so you'll find me if you want me."

"Come on up to my rooms instead," McCarty invited. "'Tis after three o'clock and you'll get little enough sleep as it is. By the sainted powers—there's a light in my windows! Thieves!"

He had halted in astonishment, but now he broke into a run and with Dennis at his heels sped to his own stoop. The entrance door stood wide, and still swiftly, but with a

measure of caution, they stole up the stairs. There was no key in the door leading to McCarty's living-room, but it stood ajar and at the sight which met their gaze through the aperture McCarty halted again, this time in wordless indignation.

Wade Terhune's long, attenuated figure lay stretched out comfortably in the best arm-chair with a tattered dream book open and lying face downward across his knee and a sizable heap of cigarette ashes in a china tray upon the table beside him. While they stared, a delicate snore broke the silence and McCarty's face purpled.

That china tray had been his mother's; its rightful place was upon the mantel and tobacco had never profaned it before! As to the dream book, its possession had been the one shameful but fascinating secret in McCarty's life; where had that meddlesome, officious son-of-a-gun found it, and how had he got in?

"Is it boarders you're taking?" Dennis inquired innocently. "'Twould be well for you if you had as good bolts on your doors as the Hildreth woman had!"

"The gall of him!" McCarty found his voice and muttered wrathfully: "It would serve him right if I had him took up for breaking and entering!"

He pushed Dennis unceremoniously into the room and following closed the door with a resounding slam. Instantly with no trace of sleep in them Terhune's slightly prominent eyes opened wide and he smiled with perfect self-possession.

"There you are at last, my dear McCarty! And Riordan, too; so you are still hunting in couples? I have waited for you some little time."

He spoke chidingly and McCarty's sandy mustache bristled.

"I was not expecting you, sir. May I ask how you got in?"

"Oh, I had no difficulty; both of your doors open quite

readily with a skeleton key, and of course I could not wait about outside." Terhune waved airily toward the nearest chairs and as though hypnotized Dennis sank into one of them, but McCarty ostentatiously removed the china tray from the table and substituted a familiar, battered one of brass liberally patterned with verdigris.

"I hope you made yourself at home, sir!" he remarked ironically, his grim eyes fastened on the book upon his uninvited guest's knee. "I see you found something to amuse yourself with while you waited!"

"Ah, this elemental but highly entertaining little fore-runner of our friend Freud?" Terhune smiled again indulgently. "It is interesting to note how coincidentally the interpretations which mere superstition has placed upon the subconscious agree with the conclusions which science has reached."

He laid the book upon the table and McCarty hastily retrieved it and locked it in his desk.

"I don't know any guy named Freud," Dennis observed unexpectedly. "Does he say that dreams go by contraries, Mr. Terhune? I dreamed the other night that my step-brother home in the old country, that's drunk up two farms and about eight droves of pigs a'lready, was strung up by a vigilance committee and then cut down in time to save the worthless life of him!—"

He paused to draw breath and McCarty took advantage of the opportunity to suggest:

"You wanted to see me very particularly, Mr. Terhune?"

"Yes, but merely to tell you that the little affair of Creveling is practically cleared up. It seemed to promise a nice little problem at first but it proved to be a very simple matter after all."

"Yes, sir?" McCarty replied cautiously. "So the inspector was saying down at headquarters just now."

"Druet?" Terhune frowned. "I cannot conceive how he could have obtained the data which has come into my pos-

session! Even I would never have discovered the truth had it not been for my years of profound analytical study; an advantage which has not been attained by our excellent friend the inspector. It must have been sheer guess work on his part and yet I cannot imagine upon what grounds he could predicate the fact of George Alexander's guilt!"

"Alexander's—?" McCarty seemed to find some difficulty once more with his speech and Dennis's eyes almost started from his head. "The inspector said nothing about Mr. Alexander!"

"Ah, ha! I anticipated as much!" Terhune rubbed his long, slim hands together in complacency. "He is upon the wrong track again, then, as usual. A good man, a steady, reliable plodder, but prone to stubborn prejudices and too obstinate to admit even to himself that he may be mistaken!"

There was just enough truth in this criticism of his superior to sting McCarty and he retorted loyally:

"He wasn't on the wrong track in the last case on which we all worked together, though, Mr. Terhune."

The criminologist flushed darkly.

"My own hands were tied by the lack of information which was willfully withheld from me!" he asserted hastily. "But upon whom has Inspector Druet fastened his eye as a possible suspect in this case?"

"He'll probably tell you himself, sir, if you ask him," McCarty responded evasively. "Since you've come to me, may I ask what evidence you've got against George Alexander?"

"Absolutely conclusive evidence, my dear McCarty! Motive, opportunity, method, the means itself and the confirmation of his subsequent mental reaction as betrayed by his attitude."

"Everything but the proof!" murmured Dennis irrepressibly, but Terhune paid no attention to the remark.

"If you will both come to my rooms to-morrow evening at eight o'clock—or rather this evening, for it is nearly dawn

—you will learn all the details and unless I am very much mistaken you will hear an interesting confession. I have arranged a little experiment—”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Dennis interrupted firmly. “If ’tis going to be anything like the last one you kindly invited me to, you’ll have to excuse me. I’m not rightfully concerned with this case anyway, being dragged into it by Mac, here, just to keep him company, and I was not the same man for weeks after you made me sit in the dark and listen to that murder all over again!”

“We’ll both be there, sir!” McCarty declared. “If Mr. Alexander confesses I wouldn’t miss being there for the world and all! I suppose I may just as well lay off for the day and get some sleep?”

Terhune smiled patronizingly as he rose.

“You are skeptical as usual, McCarty, I see. By all means pursue your own line of investigation whatever it may be, if it amuses you, but you may take my word for it that you are wasting your time. I will leave you now, for I have many preparations to make.”

“One minute, sir.” McCarty hesitated. “Would you answer me one question that’ll maybe sound foolish to you but that’s been sticking in my crop for some time, nevertheless? Your speaking of the years of study you’ve had put me in mind of it that I’ve been intending to ask somebody who might know about such things.”

“Certainly, my dear McCarty! I am only too glad to help you to improve yourself.”

“Well, when you’ve come here on a serious matter like a murder case it seems a silly thing to talk about, but could you tell me, sir, if playing cards have any meaning?”

“Of course,” Terhune responded, amused. “From the ancient necromancers down through the centuries they have each possessed an especial significance of one sort or another to the gullible, but it is too lengthy a subject to go into now. Is there any particular card you have in mind?”

"Yes, sir. The nine of diamonds."

"Ah, that is another matter!" The interest quickened in Terhune's tone. "That card has a definite place in history. The Curse of Scotland."

"The curse of—what, sir?" McCarty exclaimed.

"That is the term which has been applied to the nine of diamonds for several centuries and there are various explanations for it but it is not definitely known from what source it was originally derived." Terhune warmed to his subject. "In one ancient game called 'Pope Joan' it is the 'pope' and therefore the symbol of Antichrist; in another, 'comette,' it was the chief card. Comette is a game with terrific odds which was played for tremendously high stakes and ruined many of the best families in Scotland when it was in vogue there."

"I'd like to know how 'tis played," observed Dennis wistfully. "Any game that could separate a Scotchman from his money ought to make a clean-up among the Irish!"

"But has the nine of diamonds no other meaning, then?" asked McCarty, in vast disappointment.

"Oh, yes," Terhune reassured him. "As a curse, it is supposed to go back to the nine lozenges on the Dalrymple arms, as the Earl of Stair was responsible for the massacre of Glencoe, but the most probable tradition concerning the origin of the sinister name is that the Duke of Cumberland, while he was drunk and gambling on the night before the battle of Culloden, wrote across the face of the nine of diamonds the relentless order to his cohorts that no quarter was to be given to the enemy on the morrow."

"'No quarter!'" McCarty repeated, and the old buoyant note had returned to his tired voice. "No quarter! That means that they were to be killed outright, with no mercy shown them, doesn't it?—Thanks very much, Mr. Terhune! I've prayed for a nine of diamonds many's the time to fill a straight, or a flush, or a full house, but never did I know before that there was a curse attached to it!"

"That is only ancient history, my dear McCarty!" Terhune paused in the doorway.

McCarty's face was very grave.

"Yes, sir, and history has a way of repeating itself, I've heard. 'Twas no fool who said that first."

When Terhune had departed he turned to Dennis, who was gazing wide-eyed at him and added:

"No quarter; you got that, Denny? 'Twas a notice to Creveling that his time had come!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE LURE OF CHANCE

ON their way to breakfast the next morning McCarty bought a sheaf of newspapers and when the modest little restaurant was reached he handed all but one of them to his companion.

"Here, Denny. Have a look at what the boys say about the release of Hill. I'll bet they've put up a howl you could hear in the next world if so be you were there."

"Which I'm not yet, but there's no telling after to-night," Dennis said darkly. "You'd no call to be letting me in for another dose of the black art of that Terhune!—Have you no interest yourself in the news of the day?"

"I'm looking for a certain ad.," McCarty replied. "Here it is! 'Lost. On Thursday night, black Russian sable scarf, five skins, private seal engraved on small gold clasp. Liberal reward. Address X. *Daily Bulletin*.'"

"Whatever—?" Dennis gave a little start. "Oh, I remember! And is 'X' Mrs. Kip?"

"No. 'Tis me," said McCarty modestly. "After I 'phoned you last night to meet me for dinner I stopped at the *Bulletin* office and put that in; I'd like to see Mrs. Kip's face if she reads it!—But what's the matter with your own? You look as if something had bit you!"

"Mac!" The newspaper shook in Dennis' excited hand. "What was it that you heard Ford say to his wife in the hall yesterday?—That he was 'done for,' wasn't it?"

"Yes. What—?"

"Well, I guess he was, all right! Give a look at that!"

Dennis passed over the paper and McCarty read in flaring headlines:

"Failure on Stock Exchange. Lonsdale Ford & Company Go to Wall. Many Small Investors and Speculators Hard Hit in Crash."

Below in smaller type appeared the story in detail, but McCarty merely glanced through it. He was working against time now; against the time when the inspector's dragnet might bring in the girl, Ilsa, or he might tire of waiting and arraign Hill formally before a Magistrate on a murder charge. A sudden inspiration had come to the ex-roundsman and characteristically he determined to put it at once to the test.

"So that was what Ford meant," McCarty commented. "Come on, let's order; I'll go over and have a little interview with him before he leaves the house. I'm thinking he'll be more ready to talk now that it's all come out than he was yesterday."

They ate a quick breakfast and McCarty left Dennis to proceed to the fire house with the understanding that the latter was to call for him at his rooms at eight that night. In the crosstown car he studied the *Bulletin* once more, but not for the satisfaction of rereading his advertisement; the reproduction of a photograph on the second page had caught his eye.

It was that of a broad-shouldered man of about forty, undeniably handsome at a casual glance, although closer inspection revealed a slight but telltale fullness of the lips and heaviness of jowl, and the eyes with their almost feminine sweep of lashes did not seem to meet the gaze quite squarely. There were incipient pouches beneath them, too, and the smile which was intended to be dashing held the suggestion of a leer. Under the picture was the name "Eugene Christopher Creveling."

Where had he seen that face before? He had known it on sight for that of the man stretched upon the floor of the

study two nights ago, and yet McCarty felt a peculiar, haunting sense of familiarity as of a living presence. Crevelling's picture had appeared in the newspapers frequently enough in connection with various escapades in the old days, but it was not that. He could associate no sound of a voice in connection with the face in his memory, recall no details, but he knew that somewhere quite lately he had seen that man alive.

He was still pondering over it when he reached the St. Maur Apartments.

"Mr. and Mrs. Ford ain't here, suh. They done gone away; went last night," the saddle-colored switchboard operator told him.

McCarty smiled.

"No, they didn't," he said with easy assurance. "I know all about Mr. Ford's trouble and I'm not here to bother him. He'll see me, all right. Just say Mr. McCarty wants a word with him."

The boy hesitated, but the note of authority as well as confidence which rang in the ex-roundsman's tones impressed him, and reluctantly he obeyed. There was a moment of evident indecision at the other end of the wire and then he turned a relieved face to the visitor.

"You can go right up, suh. I didn't know—I had orders not to announce *nobody* and Mr. Ford is a mighty positive gentleman!"

"I know him!" McCarty grinned as he thought of his reception on the previous day. "He's out of luck just now and his bark is worse than his bite."

The same servant admitted him as on the day before, but the smile was gone from his Asiatic countenance, and although the drawing-room presented as bravely luxurious an air, there was an atmosphere of forlorn bravado about it which permeated even McCarty's matter-of-fact sensibilities.

"Well, what can I do for you now?" A toneless, in-

describably weary voice spoke just behind him and McCarty wheeled, an uncontrollable gasp escaping him as his eyes met those of Lonsdale Ford. Could this broken creature with his twisted, bitter, tragic smile be the same man who had so coolly and arrogantly ordered him from his presence on the previous day?

"Mr. Ford! I—I hope you'll not think I'd have intruded on you now if I could have helped it, sir, but we're still working on the Creveling matter and I've got to obey orders."

"Oh, that's all right, my man. One thing more or less doesn't make any difference now." Ford motioned toward a chair and then sank into another opposite, as though his legs would no longer support him, yet he added with a touch of the old savageness in his tone: "I didn't shoot Creveling, if it will do you any good to know it, but I wish I had, and then put a bullet through my own brain! He's dead, but he was a damned cur! The papers are saying a lot of rotten things about me this morning; that I played my customers for suckers and God knows what else, but if I was as white-livered as he I'd go and jump off the nearest dock!"

"I've heard that intimated by more than you, Mr. Ford. We never had the least thought of you being guilty, but we think there's some information it's in your power to give us that'll maybe help a lot." McCarty paused. "Of course, if you don't care to give it we can't compel you now—"

"Oh, I'll give it, fast enough!" Ford's harsh, dry laughter rang out and then was as quickly suppressed. "I don't know whether it will help you or not, for I haven't the slightest idea who killed Creveling, but I'll give you all the information you want about the whole rotten bunch of them! I kept my mouth shut yesterday because I had a sort of forlorn hope that they'd be white enough to tide me over even after Creveling himself had welched, but when

Cutter threw me down cold I made up my mind that I'd show them all up and I will! *They* got the money—my own, not my customers', but if I'd had it yet I could have weathered the storm. I wouldn't kick if the game had been straight; I'm not a poor loser, but I'm convinced it was crooked and I've been made the sucker. God! Even a tin horn card sharp will stake you to cigarette money after he's stripped you of your roll!"

"Game?" McCarty repeated, a light beginning to glimmer through his consciousness.

"Of course. I was on my way to being a rich man even in these skyrocketing days, but it's all gone over that green table of Cutter's, damn him!" Ford stopped abruptly and the rage in his face gave way to a look of sly derision. "You fellows at headquarters are mighty smart but you didn't know that the biggest games in the city are pulled off and have been for years in that respectable looking house of his down on the Avenue! He is nothing more nor less than a professional gambler, only he does things on a scale that's never been known before even in the Big Town."

A gambler! The connecting link at last! It was the gambling fever, the lure of chance which held this strangely assorted group of people together. More potent than drink or drugs, it had bound them in an association of silence for mutual protection, and drawn gentleman and cad, aristocrat and upstart into a degenerating democracy!—But why hadn't he guessed?

Then the memory of a chance remark of Dennis' on the previous evening returned to make his chagrin complete. When he told his friend what he had learned from Miss Frost about the Kip woman and how she had been broke one day and flush the next Dennis remarked: "Like a gambler!" Even then he had not tumbled to the truth!

It all seemed so obvious now in the light of this revelation! Those two dissipated rounders, Waverly and Creveling, seeking to stimulate their jaded senses with the ex-

citement of the game; this money-mad Ford, to whom all of life had been a gamble; John Cavanaugh O'Rourke, with the hot, reckless, sport-loving blood of his forebears in his veins, and Cutter sitting cold and inscrutable in the midst of them! But what of the women? Where did they figure in this scheme of things?

"I'm not yellow!" Ford went on. "I wouldn't cry 'crooked!' just because I'd been stung, but looking back now I can see how I was played, like a trout in a stream, and they're doing the same thing to O'Rourke. They'll clean him and his wife, too, before they're through—Cutter and Waverly, and Creveling was helping it along when he got his! He stood in, and I was just beginning to see it; that's why I went to him first when I saw what was coming. I wasn't a beggar, I only wanted a loan of some of my own back and Creveling had got most of it. He understood, he knew I was on to the game and he told me he'd see me through; made an appointment with me for Thursday and then at the last minute took back his word, welched! He thought he could bluff me, but I'd have gone back yesterday and gotten it from him somehow, only somebody else got to him first, with a .44!"

McCarty was scarcely listening. "They'll clean him and his wife, too!" were the last words which had pounded themselves into his brain.

"Do you mean that Lady Mar—that Mrs. O'Rourke plays, too? That Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Creveling and Mrs. Waverly have been going up against a game like that?"

Ford laughed again, mirthlessly.

"They're worse than we are! Not that my wife is an inveterate gambler; as a matter of fact the poor kid hasn't any card sense at all and doesn't even care for it. She only piked along because I—I compelled her to."

"You?"

Ford nodded.

"Oh, I admit I've been a fool in more ways than one, but

I'm coming clean to you now for I want you to understand the situation and fix Cutter and his outfit!" he declared frankly. "I was making money and we were happy enough a few years ago with our own jolly little crowd, but when I bought my seat on the Exchange Mrs. Ford got ambitious socially. She met Mrs. Creveling at some charity affair and got in with her, and Creveling introduced me to Cutter. That was the beginning of it, and I don't mind telling you that I encouraged Mrs. Ford to travel with that bunch; I thought I'd get in myself through them with big moneyed interests and I didn't realize I was practically using my own wife as a capper, the way Cutter is using Mrs. Baillie Kip. She's just a kind of a grown-up little girl, my wife is; she loves to spend money and be taken up by the swell people and she never can realize that there might be another motive behind the flattery of other men, rotters like Cutter. He made a sort of play for her a year or so ago and she came to me like a big kid and told me; I let him know where he got off and after that she wasn't bothered, but they had it in for me. You see the game now, don't you, McCarty?"

McCarty nodded slowly in his turn and his expression was very grim, but he waited without speaking.

"Mrs. Creveling and Mrs. Waverly are different; they belong by right of birth and their old, withered family trees. They don't have to struggle to get anywhere and in another way they are just as jaded as their husbands. They've exhausted every allowable means of amusing themselves and they turned to the game for what excitement they could get out of it, and it got them—the fascination, I mean. You've seen them, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

"They're both beauties; Mrs. Creveling in a cold, aloof sort of way and Mrs. Waverly is a devilish, snaky vamp. Both mighty attractive and each a different type; get me?"

"You mean that Cutter is using them both as steerers,

too?" McCarty's honest tones were filled with shocked amazement. "Ladies like them, with positions in the highest society and more money than they can spend!"

"Oh, without their knowledge, of course, but their husbands stood in with Cutter. I know, because they were constantly at his house, at the so-called little intimate dinners and afternoon musicales he was supposed to give, but which really masked the games which went on day and night. The rest of us were rank outsiders asked only on certain specified nights; only the Crevelings and the Waverlys met all the different exclusive little groups that gathered there. That is the secret of Cutter's success and his immunity. You don't think he made his millions out of just our set, do you? He kept his crowds separate, with those exceptions, and only catered to people who could no more afford the scandal and notoriety of a raid than he could. More than one poor devil has lost his last dollar and shot himself in that room that looks like a conservatory at the back of Cutter's house, and I'll wager that more money has changed hands there in any given length of time than at Monte Carlo for the same period! But no scandal has ever attached to Cutter, his system was too perfect for that; the poor devils who did themselves in were spirited home and the papers made a big fuss later over their deaths from accident or appendicitis operations, or some such lie. Of course their families were as eager to conceal the truth as Cutter; that's where he played safe. The worst part of it is that he is a real aristocrat, if there is such a thing in this country; his family is one of the oldest and he has always kept his social position impregnable, though I understand he inherited nothing but the house and some rotten ancestor's gambling instinct! People don't dare squeal on him for he has clients and victims among the connections of every prominent family in the country. He thought I wouldn't dare, either, but I've got nothing to lose now."

"I wonder he didn't take that into consideration," Mc-

Carty remarked. "You say he refused to let you have a loan to tide you over when he knew it meant ruin to you."

Ford colored painfully.

"There was a personal matter involved and it warped his judgment, I guess," he mumbled. "My wife, you know."

"I see." McCarty strove to make his voice sympathetic, but he was filled with loathing for the unprincipled weakling before him. He'd borrow money, if he could, from a man who had insulted his wife and if he couldn't, sell him out! The ex-roundsman's foot tingled to administer a kick to the cowardly sneak, but he must learn more. "If Mrs. Waverly and Mrs. Creveling played just because they were bored and Mrs. Ford because you wanted her to, why did Mrs. Kip and—and Mrs. O'Rourke sit in the game?"

"Oh, Connie Kip is a born adventuress; a professional gambler in a way, like Cutter," replied Ford carelessly. "She's too shrewd to jeopardize the social position she has wormed herself into by any indiscreet flirtation, but the cards are her means of a livelihood and I could swear I've caught her cheating more than once though if Cutter knows it he doesn't mind her counting herself in on his graft for she's popular and useful to him as a steerer. It is through her that he gets his clutches on the young asses in society with more money than brains."

"Was she at Cutter's on Thursday evening?" asked McCarty suddenly.

"No, only the O'Rourkes. We expected Creveling but he 'phoned that he couldn't make it so we had a five-handed game; tame enough, too, with neither Creveling nor Waverly there. They were the plungers, and helping along Cutter's fleecing of O'Rourke, I suspect. I might have warned him, I suppose, but I had my own fish to fry in trying to win my money back from them or get a loan, and then misery loves company, you know!"

"But Mrs. O'Rourke?" persisted McCarty. "What possessed her to play?"

"For the same reason that her husband did: a sheer love of the game," responded Ford with an odd note of respectful admiration in his tone. "She's a thoroughgoing sports-woman, and I hear she came from a long line of hard riding, heavy drinking, devil-may-care Irish nobility who would have staked all they had any day on the turn of a card. For all she's so utterly feminine, she's the gamest loser I ever saw for a woman or man either, and there isn't another in the crowd who can touch her for looks and brains and charm, but she's such a clean sport herself that I don't suppose she has an inkling there is anything crooked about the whole outfit."

McCarty rose. He felt suddenly stifled and as though his breakfast had not agreed with him. This cheap renegade might be useful to him in the future, and his native caution warned him to go before he expressed himself openly. Not for the life of him could he listen to another word concerning the Lady Peggy, even in praise, from such lips.

"Thank you, sir. I guess you've told me all I need to know to work on now and I won't pester you any longer. I won't give you away, but there'll be no more fleecing of Mr. O'Rourke nor any one else, I can promise you that."

"I don't give a damn about that, I'm done!" Ford followed him to the door. "Creveling got his, although I don't know from what particular motive, of many possible ones that his murderer might have had. Waverly won't last long at the pace he is traveling, but Cutter is the man I want to see shown up; he'd rather be shot, any day, than have that happen, for he's got a certain pride of a sort. I'm dead sorry that you can't hang the murder on him, for thieves fall out, you know, but we'd have to help prove his alibi unless we perjured ourselves and there were the O'Rourkes, anyway. Nail him for running a crooked game and I'll be your star witness!"

McCarty breathed deeply when he reached the street once more, as though to clear his lungs from a fetid atmosphere,

but he felt that he had accomplished more in the past hour than at any time since he had undertaken the case. He was on the inside now, looking out, and although he had learned nothing which pointed to the actual solution of the crime there was a chance that the right thread was in his hands at last.

During his interview with the bankrupt broker an idea had come to him which completely revolutionized his earlier plan of procedure and he lost no time in finding a telephone booth and calling up headquarters. His later decision had not been brought about by anything he had learned from Ford, nor was it connected with Nicholas Cutter and his sub rosa profession; it was the alternate thread in the tangle which might lead to the truth.

Inspector Druet was already at his desk and informed him that Yost reported no trace of the missing Hildreth woman, and Martin, when he was relieved at the Creveling house, said that Hill had betrayed neither protest nor surprise at finding himself under guard, nor had he made the least move to escape espionage. The report of the chief medical examiner on the autopsy had come in also, and he had reversed the opinion of his assistant; Creveling could not have killed himself. It had been murder.

"Perhaps it's just as well, sir." McCarty's tone was humble. "I—I've changed my mind, thinking over the dope you've got against Hill, and moreover I've dug up a few things this morning that look like they might make the case complete."

"I thought so!" the inspector laughed jubilantly. "Good old Mac! You're not afraid to admit you've made a mistake, are you?"

"No, sir," McCarty responded slyly. "Not being regularly connected with the force any longer, promotion don't bother me and there's nothing to hold me back when I'm in the wrong from saying so, and starting over. I've been thinking that as long as you've got the dragnet out after

that Hildreth woman and the stations and ferries and roads watched so that she can't make her getaway from the city, we're bound to land her in time and there's no use in waiting for her to try to get in touch with Hill before we run him in again. I think I've got a way to make him talk after a day or two in the Tombs, but I'd like to make the arrest myself."

"Go to it!" the inspector said heartily. "Your mind was so set on it that he wasn't guilty, I thought I'd give you a few days to find out that you were barking up the wrong tree, but the Hildreth woman is too clever by half to give herself away by trying to communicate with him. Come down here and I'll have a warrant ready for you."

"Couldn't you send it up to me at the Creveling house?" McCarty asked. "I'm on my way there now, sir, and I don't want to lose any time."

"All right. I'll have it there in half an hour." Inspector Druet added: "Have you seen anything of Terhune?"

"Yes, sir. He broke into my rooms last night and Denny and me found him sitting there as calm as you please when we came up from headquarters!" McCarty almost choked over the recollection. "He's invited us both to one of his séances to-night."

"I'll see you there, then." The inspector laughed once more. "He has the case all doped out to suit himself, I suppose, but he wouldn't condescend to take me into his confidence. It won't matter to us, Mac, for if he's hit on the truth we'll have the bird safely caged beforehand. Do you want us to keep the news of Hill's rearrest out of the papers?"

"No, but leave that to me, sir. I want to give a young friend of mine, Jimmie Ballard of the *Bulletin*, a beat for the first evening edition; after that they can all go to it, and welcome, the more publicity the better. It's only that Jimmie's done me a good turn in the shape of information now and again and I'd like to put something his way."

"It's all in your hands, Mac, so long as there isn't any slip in getting Hill under lock and key. One of the boys will be at the house with the warrant almost as soon as you are."

But McCarty did not at first turn his steps in the direction of the Creveling house. Instead he took a downtown Third Avenue car and alighted at the scene of the Hildreth woman's escape on the previous night. The stout young operative from the detective bureau who had relieved Yost was seated in the kitchen, where the broken door and smashed flower pots still bore mute evidence of siege and flight. It was evident, too, from a hasty glance around the few barely furnished rooms of the little flat that Yost and the policeman on the beat had made an even more thorough search of the premises for possible clues than McCarty and Dennis had done.

Every drawer and box and receptacle of any sort had been thrown open and its contents scattered far and wide; even the bed had been ripped apart and the cheap upholstery of the parlor suite was cut and slashed to ribbons, undoubtedly in a search for the stolen emeralds. McCarty looked everywhere but that which he himself conscientiously sought was not forthcoming—a gilt-edged pack of playing cards with their backs printed in rich colors and gold.

Half an hour later, accompanied with obvious reluctance by another man, he presented himself at the Creveling house and was admitted by Rollins, who eyed his companion somewhat uneasily before he spoke.

"Good morning, sir. There's a—a person waiting 'ere for you. 'E said as 'ow you'd be along presently."

"That's all right; I'll see him in a minute. How is Mrs. Creveling?"

"Better, sir, the doctor says, but resting. Mrs. Waverly and Mr. Alexander are upstairs with 'er."

"I don't want to bother any of them," McCarty said hast-

ily. "My business is with the valet, Frank Hill. Will you ask him to come here?"

"Very good, sir."

When the butler had departed upon his errand McCarty turned to his companion.

"Go into the breakfast room, there, but leave the door ajar. Listen to everything that is said and when I call you, come out. Understand?"

"Yes." The man moved over to the door indicated, shaking his head disapprovingly as he went. "I don't like this business! It don't seem fair to me, even if this fellow has done what you say he has. It's a dirty trick!"

As he disappeared a fourth man slid around from an angle of the stairs where he had evidently been waiting.

"Here, Mac. Here's the warrant the Old Man sent up; want me to stay and serve it for you?"

"No. Give it to me, Hecker, but you'd better wait with Yost. Go upstairs and bring him down to the back hall as soon as I get into talk with Hill, and when I serve him you can do the rest."

The man withdrew and McCarty pocketed the warrant as Hill, pale and worn but quite composed, appeared on the stairs.

"Good morning, sir. You wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes. Hill, what did you do when you were released from the station house last night?"

"I came straight back here, sir. I—I hadn't been given any notice and I am still in service, for Mrs. Creveling is keeping me on, at least till things are straightened out, sir." His tone was respectful but indifferent as though the reply were a superfluous one.

"You've been here ever since; in the house, I mean?"

"Of course, sir." This time he spoke with mild surprise.

"Where do you stay on your time off, Hill?"

"I sleep here, sir; I haven't any place of my own. I've been right with Mr. Creveling all these years."

"Do you ever travel under any other name than the one you're known by here?"

"Of course not!" There was just the proper touch of scandalized indignation in his voice at the question.

"Do you know a woman who calls herself 'Hildreth'?" McCarty shot the name at him and for a moment the man's pale eyelids quivered, but he gave no other sign.

"No, sir. I never heard of her, sir."

"Then you didn't know that that is an alias of Ilsa Helwig's, the housemaid who stole Mrs. Creveling's emeralds and jumped her bail?"

"No, sir. Is it, indeed?"

"It is," responded McCarty grimly. "And I suppose you're not stuck on her? You're not known as 'Mr. Hildreth' down in the neighborhood where she lived before we arrested her again last night? You didn't leave this house last night between eleven and twelve by shinning over the back fences and go down there, only to run into a dick from headquarters who was trailing you and get scared off before ever you had a chance to see her?"

"I—I did not." The shot had told and at McCarty's mendacious statement of the woman's arrest Hill had visibly winced. "I don't know what you are talking about. I never heard of any woman named 'Hildreth,' and I wasn't out of the house last night."

"Mr. Udell!" McCarty raised his voice firmly and the shrinking figure of the night clerk from the Third Avenue drugstore appeared in the door of the breakfast room. "Who is this man?"

"It's Mr. Hildreth, sir," he stammered.

"You'd swear to it?"

"I'd have to, sir, it's the truth.—Oh, Mr. Hildreth, I hope you'll realize I'm not doing this of my own accord! I hated to come and give you away like this—!"

"What have you to say, Hill?" McCarty cut the drug-gist's lamentations abruptly short.

Hill drew himself up, and staring straight into Udell's eyes he said distinctly:

"Nothing, sir. I never saw this man before in all my life." Then all at once he began to tremble uncontrollably. "I haven't seen Ilsa Helwig since she was taken away from here under arrest! I don't know any one down on Third Avenue, I've never been there—!"

"Then how did you know this man came from there? I haven't said anything about Third Avenue! How did you know it was near there the Hildreth woman lived?—You're under arrest, Hill, for the murder of Eugene Creveling!"

CHAPTER XV

WADE TERHUNE EXPERIMENTS

TO Jimmie Ballard's joy and gratitude he secured his "beat" and the *Bulletin* made the most of its exclusive story of Hill's arrest. McCarty put in a busy afternoon and promptly at a quarter before eight that night Dennis Rior-dan made his appearance at the other's rooms. He was spick and span in a new spring suit that seemed oddly bulky on his spare form and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down like a buoy above a collar several sizes too tight for even his thin neck, but although the night wind had the sharp edge of an approaching storm, beads of perspiration stood out upon his brow. He walked, too, with a singularly noiseless tread as he advanced to the table and laid thereon a pair of bright yellow, semi-transparent gloves.

The disapproval with which McCarty eyed them changed quickly to curiosity.

"Is it airs you're putting on, Denny, with your gloves? They look like rubber to me! If that's the latest style, you male fashion manikin—!"

"Rubber they are, and 'tis protection, not airs," interrupted Dennis with the defensive dignity of one anticipating ridicule. "And if 'twill interest you to know it, I've rubber soled boots on and rubberized clothes under these! I've no mind to let myself in for any shocks from Terhune's machines!"

"And I suppose along with your Saint Joseph in your pocket you've got a hare's foot and one of those little worsted Rintintins like Molly's husband brought back from France!" McCarty's tone sounded the depths of scorn. "There's an

old ladies' home I've been contributing to for years in memory of my mother, with never a soul of my own to get the benefit of it, but I'm thinking 'twill be just the place for you, my lad!"

"Old woman or no!" Dennis retorted doggedly. "I'm taking no chances with Terhune and his devilments!"

McCarty shrugged.

"It's little worry you need to have about Mr. Terhune; 'tis only the brain he tries his little experiments on so you're perfectly safe!"

Dennis sniffed and pocketed the offending gloves, but made no reply and in silence they started for the apartments of the criminologist.

An angular young man with the face of a student opened the door to them and smiled pleasantly.

"Mr. Terhune told me that he was expecting you and your friend, Mr. McCarty. He is just completing the arrangement of his apparatus and he said that you were both to go to the consulting-room."

"Are we the first, Mr. Bassett?" Dennis hung back, deliberately making conversation with the laboratory assistant.

"Yes, Mr. Riordan. There will only be a small gathering this evening, I understand."

"Come on!" McCarty ordered impatiently. "I want to see what's doing!"

They found Terhune emerging from the familiar screen in one corner of the great bare room which now was furnished merely with a row of chairs facing what appeared to be a motion picture screen, and a single chair set forward and well at one side, like that of a teacher before a class.

"I thought you might come a little earlier, my dear McCarty, but there will still be time for me to explain our experiment this evening to you." Terhune shook hands in high good humor. "I see by the papers that you and Inspector Druet have followed the obvious course; I warned

you against it, but I should have known how futile my effort would be. Take my word for it, McCarty, you will have to let the valet Hill go within twenty-four hours."

"I'd not be surprised, sir," McCarty responded quietly, but there was a sudden twinkle in his eye.

Dennis tugged surreptitiously at his sleeve.

"What is it, moving pictures?" he asked in a rasping whisper.

"Yes, of a sort, Riordan." Terhune himself answered with a smile. "You will merely see a series of numbers projected on the screen, but I will explain them to you later. I am using the old association test, McCarty, but in connection with a new and improved tonoscope called the vibratoscope.—Do you see this drum?"

He moved the screen aside as he spoke and displayed a large cylindrical case mounted upon a platform with supports at either end and a scale like a double foot-rule projected across but not touching its rounded side which was perforated with slanting rows of almost infinitesimal holes. Before it an upright brass arm held a needle pointer tipped with a tiny flickering flame.

"Look at that, now!" exclaimed Dennis, impressed. "And this vibrat—what you said, sir—what does it do?"

"It projects the vibrations of the human voice upon the screen out there, much in the manner of the motion picture machine," responded Terhune. "The original tonoscope merely registered the tonal quality, showing by a standardized scale whether it was sharp or flat, but with this amplified vibratoscope the vocal manifestations of emotion may be measured down to an accuracy of a hundredth of a tone or even finer.

"The vibrations of the voice, as you see now while I am speaking, cause that little flame on the needle to flicker, diminishing with the lowered degrees of a single tone and rising with its upward trend. Inside that cylindrical case is a large drum which contains some thirty-six thousand

holes arranged in rows so as to represent a series of tone shadings covering the entire range of the human voice from a murmur to a shriek. In a tonoscope there are only eighteen thousand holes which form merely an octave. Do you follow me?"

McCarty was studying the apparatus closely but Dennis nodded.

"Yes, sir," he said somewhat uncertainly. "I'm quite a ways behind but I misdoubt I'll catch up when I see it actually working on the screen. And we don't have to hold any little bulbs nor wires nor anything?"

"No, merely to listen and watch. I shall not ask you nor McCarty to take any more active part in to-night's test."

"But just how does this work, Mr. Terhune?" McCarty asked.

"By the revolution of the inner drum you see," explained the criminologist. "I set it in motion when the test starts. If the speaker sounds middle C—which in the original tonoscope makes two hundred and fifty-six vibrations a second—the line on the drum which has two hundred and fifty-six holes will seem to remain stationary while all the other rows are continuing to move; the line which stands still points to that number on the horizontal scale and is then projected on the screen. The numbers on the vibratoscope, however, are differently graded. In action the process is almost instantaneous, so that sound is *seen* at practically the same time that it is heard.—Ah, good evening, Mr. O'Rourke!"

He stepped from behind the screen and drew its panel hastily across after him so that the earlier arrivals were for the time being hidden from the new-comer and Dennis whispered confidentially:

"Honest to God, Mac, did you understand one single word of all that discourse? I did not, but small matter of that so long as 'tis not *my* voice that contraption is taking account of! If I've only to watch the screen he can start

the show whenever he wants.—What was it he said about an association test? What kind of an association is it? Are we all supposed to be members of the club?"

"No, you loon!" McCarty responded with a low chuckle. "He means the association of one word to another; he mentions a word and you tell what it brings up in your mind, what it means to you."

"If it's education he wants he could buy a dictionary for the meaning of words," Dennis remarked. "That is, providing he could pick out one that had the answer in he wanted; I've never seen one yet."

"'Tis to find out what's on the mind of the person he's questioning," explained McCarty patiently. "I've seen him work it before, on the stepfather of that girl who was supposed to have been thrown from the window of the Glamorgan, only without any little recording machine.—There's Waverly and Cutter now! I wonder how many more are coming?"

A moment later the dry, precise tones of George Alexander were heard and following upon his heels came Inspector Druet.

"Our gathering is complete now," Terhune announced. "McCarty, come out from behind that screen. Gentlemen, you all know the inspector's deputy, Mr. McCarty, I think. This is a colleague of his, Mr. Riordan.—Now, if you will all be seated in that row of chairs facing the projection sheet I will explain the method of this little test; you will find it almost childishly simple."

Waverly turned with a subdued guffaw and a joking aside to Nicholas Cutter, but the latter did not respond and the gravity of his face remained unbroken as he advanced and seated himself at one end of the row of chairs. Waverly dropped into the next with O'Rourke beside him, then Alexander, Inspector Druet and McCarty, with Dennis bringing up at the farther end. Bassett entered only to efface himself silently behind the screen and Terhune took

the chair at one side, drawing a sheaf of papers from his pocket.

"You will see merely a series of numbers on the screen," he began. "They will mean nothing to you and are intended for my guidance, but I want you to keep your attention focused upon them nevertheless, even while you are replying to my questions. Understand, gentlemen, there is nothing arbitrary about this, for I have no authority to cross-examine you even if I desired to do so, and you are of course at liberty to reply or not as you choose. If my questions seem to you to be unduly personal, please remember that this is merely a scientific experiment, a short cut to minor details upon which we desire enlightenment and which you may have forgotten or retained merely in your subconscious memory. I am going to read to you, one at a time, a brief list of words and after each I would like you to reply in a single word if possible, telling me just what impression that word has conveyed to you; not a definition but an expression of the relative thought it brings to your mind. For an elementary instance, if I mentioned the word 'feather' you might associate it with 'bird,' or 'hat,' or 'pillow,' or 'duster,' or 'quill pen.' Do I make myself clear?"

"Damned silly little game to me!" Waverly grunted. "Why not 'Button, button'?"

"Perhaps that would not be inappropriate, Mr. Waverly!" Terhune retorted in perfect good humor. "Are you ready, Bassett?"

"Ready, sir." The reply came promptly from behind the screen and immediately a low humming sound reached their ears.

They all sat in silence while Terhune shuffled his papers for a moment and then spoke:

"We will commence with you, Mr. O'Rourke, if you don't object." At his first utterance a number had flashed upon the projection sheet and mechanically the eyes of all

save the man he addressed turned to it, only to see it vanish and be replaced in rapid succession by others varying only slightly in value. "You understand what I require, do you not?"

"I think so." Mr. O'Rourke cleared his throat. "You just want to know my first thought after hearing the word. Isn't that it?"

"Precisely. We will start, then, with the word 'life.'"

"Enjoyment!" The reply came with a boyish chuckle and forgetting the warning as to brevity he added: "A good time!"

McCarty, as he listened, thought it very like the graceless young scamp of long ago, and the naïve candor of the admission seemed to arouse an infectious amusement, for a little smile came to the faces of all except Alexander.

"Enjoyment." Terhune spoke in a deliberate monotone.

"That's what I said," responded O'Rourke. "You wanted the truth, you know."

"You mistake me, Mr. O'Rourke. I was not commenting. 'Enjoyment' is the second word."

"Oh, sport!"

"Money."

"Debts, may the devil take them!" ejaculated the irrepressible young man ruefully. The numbers, now, were flashing jerkily before them.

"Love." Terhune's voice was levelly impersonal, but when the reply came, after a pause, it was in a lower, almost reverent tone with all the banter gone from it:

"Wife."

"Friend," went on Terhune.

"Nicholas Cutter!" This came with a smile and a side-long glance.

"Creveling."

A longer pause than before, and then O'Rourke replied very gravely:

"Death."

"Scandal."

"Lies!" the young man exclaimed, flushing.

"Grief."

"Tony." The unexpected answer came promptly, as though O'Rourke's thoughts had been abruptly switched into a new channel and his voice was filled with warm-hearted tenderness and regret.

"Shot."

"Had to be." The fact that this was an impersonal test had evidently been forgotten. "There was no other way."

"Murder."

"Nothing of the sort!" indignantly. "It was a mercy to the poor brute!"

Wade Terhune folded the first paper, upon which as he voiced his questions he had been making rapid annotations, with alternate glances from O'Rourke to the projection sheet.

"That will do, Mr. O'Rourke," he said with a smile. "We have been at cross purposes during the latter part of the test, but your replies are significant, nevertheless. May I ask who 'Tony' is, or was?"

"My dog." O'Rourke's tones trembled slightly. "The finest setter in the county—I brought him from home, you see—and he was nearer human than anything that ever ran on four legs! He was old and blind but my wife wouldn't hear of anything being done to him until to-day, when the vet. said he was suffering from a cancer. I put him out of his misery myself with a single shot."

"I understand now." Terhune selected another paper from the slips he held upon his knee. "Mr. Waverly, can we induce you to play in our little game next?"

"Go ahead!" Waverly responded, with a somewhat uneasy grin. "It's your move!"

Terhune's tone fell again to a monotone.

"My first word is: 'Creveling.'"

"Suicide," responded Waverly doggedly after a moment's deliberation. He glanced covertly at Cutter and wet his thick lips with the tip of his tongue.

"Cause."

"Crazy!" The reply came with a note of defiance.

"Supper."

Waverly opened his lips to speak and then halted, while an angry red suffused his heavy, pendulous cheeks. At length with a sneering attempt at flippancy, he answered:

"Food."

"Butler," Terhune continued as though he had not noted the evasion.

"Sneak!" growled Waverly and then drew his breath in sharply with belated caution.

"Quarrel."

"Temper." He was evidently holding himself under guard now.

"Woman."

"Trouble." This was accompanied by a shrug and a leer, but his thin tones showed the strain he was under and his eyes turned not to his interrogator but to Cutter, like those of a dog to his master.

"Love." Terhune droned monotonously.

"Infatuation!" There was ineffable contempt in the tone.

"Revenge."

"Foolish!" Waverly could no longer pretend not to comprehend the trend of the examination and his small eyes snapped viciously from between the rolls of fat which all but blotted them out.

"Blood." Terhune's steady voice seemed to cut deeper into the thick hide of Waverly's sensibilities and the veins stood out suddenly upon the latter's brow.

"Say, what in hell are you getting at?" he demanded. "I've humored you with your absurd inquisition and your damned contrivances long enough!"

"That is a very satisfactory reply, Mr. Waverly," Terhune responded, unmoved. "I have only one more word to suggest to you and that is 'alibi.'"

"It's one word too many, you pettifogging meddler!" Waverly sprang from his chair. "You claim that this is only a scientific experiment and under cover of it you dare to insult people with a lot of infernal insinuations and innuendoes you haven't the nerve to come out with openly! Try this grand stand play of yours on some other sucker; I'm through!—Coming, Nick?"

"No. I haven't had my turn yet, and I confess I am interested." Cutter smiled inscrutably into the angry face looking down upon him and made no change in his easy, relaxed attitude. "You're acting like an ass, Doug! Sit down and calm yourself."

"Not I! You can be the goat if you want to, but I'm off. Inspector, if you or any other of the accredited authorities want me you know where to find me." He flung himself from the room and they heard him fumbling in the hall for his hat and stick, and then the resounding slam of the entrance door.

"Disgusting exhibition!" George Alexander commented with dignity. "I never could understand why Eugene tolerated such a boor! Mr. Terhune, like Mr. Cutter, I find your experiment profoundly interesting. Pray continue. Personally, I feel that this otherwise regrettable interruption has somewhat cleared the air."

Knowing Terhune's ultimate purpose, McCarty nearly choked and glanced at Dennis, who responded with an expectant grin. The inspector was eyeing Terhune quizzically.

"I shall not be long now." The criminologist smiled an acknowledgment of the older man's remark. "Mr. Cutter, may I trouble you next?"

"With pleasure." Cutter turned toward him. "I am quite at your service."

"Thank you. What, then, does the word 'friend' suggest to you?"

"Eugene Creveling." Cutter's tone held just the decorous touch of sorrow and regret.

"Trouble."

"Mental and imaginary, if any," he replied as though to himself.

"Weakness."

"Lack of restraint."

The figures which appeared on the projection sheet now were almost stationary, and when they changed at all varied only slightly. It seemed to McCarty as though Cutter were imitating, perhaps unconsciously, the monotonous pitch of his interrogator's voice.

"Attack."

A bare moment elapsed before the reply but it was sufficient to suggest a hint of hesitation.

"Paroxysm."

"Guest."

"Friend." This time there was no pause but the figures changed and flickered before their eyes.

"Gun."

Cutter turned with an apologetic shrug to Terhune.

"There's only one thought which that word could bring to my mind under the circumstances and the only one word which expresses it is 'whose'?"

Terhune nodded in comprehension.

"Passion."

"Curios." Cutter's voice lifted in relief to its accustomed level.

"Anger."

"Rage." Was there a shade of studied carefulness in the precision with which the mere casual definition was uttered?

"Fear."

"Apprehension."

"Doom." For the first time Terhune lowered his own voice impressively, but Cutter only shrugged once more as he made his final reply.

"Fate."

"That is all, thank you, Mr. Cutter." Terhune slipped the paper upon which as before he had been scribbling into his pocket and took up the last remaining sheet. "I shall not detain any of you gentlemen long now. Mr. Alexander, you have heard the words to which the others have replied; will you aid me now in my final test?"

"Willingly, although I must confess that I cannot quite see of what value these tests may be, nor what bearing they can have upon the distressing affair you are investigating. Will you explain your purpose to us afterward? I am highly curious."

"Oh, yes." Terhune smiled once more. "I will make my meaning and purpose quite clear to you. You were Mr. Creveling's partner and closer to him, perhaps, than any one in this room. The words I mention to you will therefore be of more intimate suggestion than those offered to the others as guides to their various trains of thought and will cover a much wider range. I trust that you will reply with the first thought which comes to you in connection with them. Let us take the word 'brother.'"

"Dead." Alexander started nervously and during the utterance of that monosyllable the figures changed three times on the luminous sheet.

"Will." Terhune studied the numerals attentively.

"Document."

"Ward."

"My niece." Alexander spoke shortly and there was a certain dry note in his voice as though all at once he ceased to find the experiment as interesting as he had previously asserted.

"Birth."

"Lineage." The slight, elderly figure drew itself up with unconscious hauteur in the big chair.

"Money."

"Er—capital." He wilted a little but his head with its graying Vandyke beard was still held proudly erect.

"Loan."

"Debt." Alexander caught himself up with a sharply drawn breath.

"Marriage."

A pause ensued and then, faintly:

"Orange blossoms."

To McCarty it seemed a trivial enough rejoinder and yet for some reason it appeared to afford Terhune obvious satisfaction.

"Prosperity."

"Luxury."

"Speculation."

"Risk." Alexander's tones quivered a little but whether from excitement or some other emotion McCarty could not determine.

"Bankruptcy."

"Loss."

"Hypothecation."

"Pledging—security." Alexander swallowed with a visible effort.

"Restitution."

"Giving back—!" Alexander half rose from his chair. "Really, Mr. Terhune, these words seem meaningless to me! I find myself giving you mere definitions—which you stated at the beginning you did not desire—because they awaken no answering chord in my mind. Frankly, I don't understand what you are attempting to do!"

"You will in just a moment, Mr. Alexander." Terhune took his eyes for a fleeting second from the projection sheet. "Tell me what comes to your mind with the word 'book-keeper.'"

"War," Alexander responded promptly and then seemed to stiffen.

"Theft."

"Jewels." There had been another slight pause.

Terhune smiled but he shook his head.

"Exposure."

"Disgrace!" The reply came in a mere whisper.

"Lower left-hand drawer." It was the first time that Terhune had suggested a phrase instead of a single word and McCarty looked at him in amazement, but his eyes were quickly drawn to the older man.

"I—I don't know what you mean!" Alexander stammered.

"What did Grayson, your bookkeeper, have in the lower left-hand drawer of his desk?" Terhune suddenly dropped all pretense of continuing the test, but in the tensiety of the moment no one save McCarty and Inspector Druet appeared to note the fact. "What did you take from that drawer on Wednesday afternoon and then put back again? You were seen with it in your hands! You were seen when you removed it a second time on Thursday, just before closing hour. What was it, Mr. Alexander?"

"I don't know! I don't understand you!" Alexander's fingers twitched nervously. "I—I took nothing from that drawer—"

"Shall I tell you?" Terhune interrupted swiftly. "It was Grayson's army pistol. Where is it now? What did you do with it?"

"I—I took it home—!" The voice quavered and died away into silence and Alexander sat gazing as though fascinated into the face of his inquisitor.

"For what purpose?" Terhune could not quite conceal the hint of exultation which crept into his tones nor the glance of triumph which he shot at the inspector and McCarty.

But as though by a miracle George Alexander seemed

to have recovered his poise and he braced himself in his chair.

"I shall not tell you," he spoke with quiet dignity. "I perceive now that this evening's so-called scientific test has been but a farce, a trick! As you have yourself stated, I am at liberty to reply or not as I choose. In this instance I do not choose."

"Then suppose I tell you?" Terhune rose and towered above the frail, dapper figure in the chair. "You have been unfortunate in your speculations in Wall Street for years and when your brother died and his will appointed you the guardian of his daughter and her two hundred thousand dollars, you were on the brink of ruin. Her money tided you over that crisis but you continued to speculate with it until little by little you lost it all. You were at your wit's end, for she would soon have come of age and demanded the accounting you could not give, when Creveling came along and wanted to marry her. She had no love for him but he offered to go into partnership with you and you brought all the influence and pressure to bear upon her that you could command.

"Knowing the man's dissolute character and unsavory reputation you nevertheless literally forced your niece into the marriage. But your partnership has not been a success and Creveling's extravagance has depleted even his once enormous capital. He demanded an accounting from you of the money left in trust with you for his wife and you are in no better position now to render such an accounting than you were when she was a girl; worse, in fact, for whereas she, for the sake of the family name, would have hushed the affair up, Creveling has threatened to expose and disgrace you, if not prosecute.

"He has been particularly abusive lately and you did not know what to do; humiliation, perhaps prison, stared you in the face. Did not a way out suggest itself to you, say, on Wednesday, Mr. Alexander? You changed your mind,

though; you put the pistol back, but the next day you took it out once more and this time it disappeared with you—the next day, a few hours before Mr. Creveling was found shot.”

“This is infamous!” Alexander exclaimed. “You are practically accusing me of the murder of my partner, my niece’s husband! You go too far, sir—!”

“I am prepared to go farther!” retorted Terhune. “After leaving your office you went directly to your rooms and did not leave them until dinner time. You dined at your club, played a rubber or two of bridge with your usual group of friends, and returned to your rooms once more at eleven. But you did not remain there, Mr. Alexander! You went out again at midnight and did not reappear for two hours or more. *Where were you during that period?*”

As though warding off a blow Alexander raised his hands to his stricken face and in the gesture there was something at once so helpless and so deeply humiliating that John O’Rourke sprang impulsively to his feet and placed his hand upon the older man’s shoulder.

“Look here, sir!” he cried expostulatingly to Terhune. “You are carrying things a little too far! I don’t know what you mean about the pistol and all that, but I do know Mr. Alexander and I know that what you are trying to accuse him of is not to be thought of for a minute!”

Alexander looked up with a faint tinge of color in his cheeks and a sudden flash of fire in his eyes.

“I thank you, my boy. After all, blood does tell, doesn’t it?” Slowly he rose to his feet and confronted the criminologist. “I did take Grayson’s pistol to my rooms on Thursday afternoon; I did go out again that night at twelve and I remained out for two hours or more. I do not propose to offer any explanation of my conduct to you; in fact I decline absolutely to speak further in your presence but if Inspector Druet and Mr. O’Rourke will accompany me to my rooms now I will produce the pistol which Grayson

can identify, and I shall account for my actions to the proper authorities!"

"You will explain here and now!" thundered Terhune, but the inspector, who had also risen, touched his arm significantly.

"I wouldn't press him, if I were you," he said rapidly in an undertone. "If he can produce that pistol your case falls to the ground, you know, and you'll get us as well as yourself in a mighty awkward position. I'll go with him as he suggests and 'phone the result to you."

Terhune shrugged.

"I do not need nor desire any credit in this case, if that is what you fear!" he said with cold displeasure. "The police department are welcome to whatever public acclaim may be forthcoming, but having alone worked out the solution of the affair to this point I should naturally like to complete it!"

"Have you one scrap of real evidence against him, Mr. Terhune?" asked Inspector Druet earnestly as he led him aside. "The pistol that killed Creveling is down at Headquarters, you know. Have you one witness who can testify that Alexander was near the Creveling house at the time of the shooting? Remember his standing in the community! Have you any proof at all against him?"

"Nothing tangible that I could bring to your bureau and place upon your desk, perhaps!" Terhune conceded with a sneer. "After all, the case was extremely simple and being quite assured of the outcome I am willing to leave the mere details in your hands. My interest in it was purely psychological. Accompany him to his rooms by all means, but guard him well for you will find that he is the guilty man!"

CHAPTER XVI

INTO THEIR HANDS

WHEN the defiant Alexander, accompanied by Mr. O'Rourke and Inspector Druet, had departed, Nicholas Cutter rose.

"Mr. Terhune," he began smoothly, "you must not be annoyed with our hot-headed young Irish friend for his ill-advised interruption of your test. I do not presume to express an opinion in the case but I shall await the outcome with the keenest expectation and I want to thank you for a most interesting evening. It has been indeed a privilege to have been present, and I trust that at some more propitious time you will permit me to drop in on you and learn how you prepared the word-test. Good evening."

As though taking leave of his host at a purely social function he bowed himself out, and the criminologist, his equanimity partially restored by the tactful if ambiguous speech, turned to McCarty and Dennis. Bassett had shown the others to the door and the three were alone.

"Well, McCarty, you did not hear the confession I promised you, owing to the interference of your compatriot and the stupidity of your superior, but has my little experiment given you food for thought?"

"If the old gentleman has got the pistol—" Dennis was beginning, but stopped and side-stepped quickly when a heavy boot descended suddenly upon his own.

"If he has, it's no proof he's not guilty!" McCarty declared heartily. "That other one might have been left by the body as a blind, and there are about three million army pistols kicking around the country.—Mr. Terhune, sir, it

was wonderful! Never did I see the beat of the way you worked it out! Now, if 'tis not too late will you be after telling us what you doped out from the association tests?"

Dennis stared at his friend in blank amazement and Terhune beamed.

"I always told you that there were possibilities in you far above the ordinary rank and file of the department, my dear McCarty!" he exclaimed. "I will explain the test to you with pleasure. Let us take each one in order. I shall not bore you with the technicalities of the vibratoscope record as thrown upon the projection sheet, but merely give you the result indicated. Mr. O'Rourke's reckless, pleasure-loving, impulsive character was clearly shown in his reactions: 'life' to him meant only sport, and money, debts."

"He loves his wife!" murmured Dennis.

"He had no emotion at the remembrance of Creveling's death but denied the possibility of scandal in connection with it," continued Terhune. "His only thought of grief concerned the dog.—Now we will take Waverly. He was doggedly determined to impress the theory of suicide upon us and his motive was plain; he feared that he himself might be regarded with suspicion because of his recent quarrel with Creveling which the butler overheard, and he rushed away in a pretense of fury before he learned how groundless that fear was. Cutter, too, insisted upon suicide as the explanation of Creveling's death but that was only from a conservative gentleman's natural distaste for being brought, however remotely, into the notoriety of a murder investigation. You can, I think, follow the steps of the test in Alexander's case."

McCarty nodded.

"That was all true about the brother's will, and the niece's money, and the marriage and all?" he asked slowly.

"Yes. I learned from her maid that Mrs. Creveling bitterly reproached her uncle for forcing her into the marriage and said that the very odor of orange blossoms stifled her;

that evidently remained in his thoughts. I have had access to his private papers and account books which proved the state of his financial affairs, and the office boy can testify as to his actions with the pistol on Wednesday and Thursday." Terhune spoke with grim satisfaction. "You heard him admit taking the pistol and also being absent from his rooms at the time the murder was committed, although I did not need his confession; the night elevator boy in the bachelor apartment building where he lives was not asleep as he thought."

"Well, sir, 'twas remarkable the way you led up to it all, and I'll be waiting myself to hear from the inspector whether the old gentleman breaks down and confesses or not.—Come, Denny, we'll be getting along." McCarty edged toward the door.

"I am glad to see, at least, McCarty, that you have an open mind." Terhune shook hands cordially. "It will be rather humiliating to the inspector, I am afraid, but he will have to admit that he was on the wrong track."

"Yes, sir." McCarty laughed. "I told you I'd not be surprised if he had to let Hill go again! Good night, Mr. Terhune."

A drenching April shower was falling as they gained the street but they trudged on beneath their umbrellas in silence. Finally Dennis remarked disgustedly:

"And so you've fallen for Terhune at last! Think shame to yourself, Mac! That little he-goat with the beard may have been selfish enough to sell his niece to the blackguard who by all accounts is better dead, but he never killed him! He wouldn't soil his hands!"

"No more he did," McCarty agreed placidly. "Still, it amused Terhune and there's no harm done. He most likely took the pistol to blow his own brains out with if Creveling kept his word and told how he'd made away with the money left to Mrs. Creveling, and where he could have been when the shooting took place is more than I know, but 'twas

not there. I'll call the inspector up later and get the truth of it."

"So you were just kidding Terhune into explaining about the word test?" demanded Dennis, bewildered. "What did you mean, then, about the inspector having to let Hill go? What man was it who murdered that guy, anyway?"

"I meant what I said," responded McCarty firmly. "And that's the last word you'll get out of me this night!"

He parted from Dennis at the fire house and proceeded to his own rooms, but he had scarcely turned on the light when the telephone rang.

"Who is it?" he demanded cautiously as he lifted the receiver.

"Druet speaking, Mac. Say, of all the blunderers in this world that scientific—!"

"I know, sir," McCarty interrupted. "Old Alexander's as innocent as a babe; I could tell that with half an eye. Did you find the pistol?"

"Yes. He's hidden it under the bathtub in his suite and Grayson came down and identified it. The old boy meant to kill himself rather than face disgrace."

"And his alibi, sir?"

"He has none," the inspector replied. "His story rings true, though; he says he couldn't sleep with what was on his mind and he went out and walked the streets. He hasn't any clear recollection of where he wandered and he didn't meet any one he knew who could testify for him, but in about two hours he found himself at Columbus Circle and took a taxi home. He remembers that the chauffeur was an ugly looking customer with a deep scar on one side of his face and that ought to help. Come downtown to-morrow morning and we'll go over the evidence against Hill."

But when early on Sunday morning McCarty presented himself at the outer office of the homicide bureau he was met by Martin who greeted him with an air of ill-concealed jubilation.

"Mac!—sir!" He corrected himself in belated acknowledgment of official manners in the possible hearing of superiors, but his eyes danced with excitement. "Who do you think is in there this minute, closeted with the Chief?"

He pointed toward the inspector's private office and McCarty eyed the door thoughtfully.

"Well, now," he observed at last. "It wouldn't knock me off my feet with surprise if 'twas the Hildreth woman."

"What-t!" Martin exploded. "You couldn't have heard! You must be in league with the devil himself!—She came in here not ten minutes ago and gave herself up; walked deliberately right into our hands!"

"I expected it, though not quite so soon," McCarty remarked placidly. "'Tis no devil I'm in league with, Martin, my lad, but I make some use of the head the Lord gave me except just to grow hair so I can listen to the barber's conversation! When you've been in the game as long as I have you'll learn to look two jumps ahead of yourself. For what else but to make her come clean do you think I let the inspector lock up Hill again?"

"You old fox!" Martin grinned. "Terhune pulled a bonehead, too, last night, didn't he? Who do you think the fellow was who croaked Creveling?"

"I'm wasting no time wondering what fellow did it!" McCarty retorted with a trace of impatience. "Give the inspector a buzz and see will he let me in on that little conference in there?"

Inspector Druet, it appeared, had been awaiting his arrival and he entered the inner sanctum to find two women there; one standing and facing the inspector across his desk and the other huddled on a chair in the corner, sniffing into her handkerchief.

"I do not want that she should be blamed," the first woman was saying in her mild, gentle voice. "It was only a great kindness that she showed in hiding me, for you see, sir, she believed in me."

Inspector Druet nodded briefly to his confrère and the woman turned her great, blue eyes slowly upon McCarty with a start of recognition.

"Who are you?" The inspector turned to the huddled figure in the corner.

"Ada Hopkins." The hand holding the handkerchief fell to her lap disclosing a small, pinched, delicately withered face. "I'm a seamstress, out by the day, and I have the flat under Mrs. Hildreth's—Mrs. Hill's, I mean. I got sick and she took care of me like an angel; nobody ever did anything for me before in all my life! I knew she was sad and in some kind of trouble, but she never told me about it and I didn't like to ask; if I didn't mind my own business I never could have kept my customers for twenty years, going from house to house—!"

"Come, come!" the inspector interrupted. "Get down to cases, Miss Hopkins. So you hid this woman when we were after her the other night, did you?"

"Yes, sir, and I'd do it again!" The little creature flared up suddenly. "She never laid a finger on anybody's jewelry, and as for accusing Mr. Hill of shooting that man—why, he was home from a little past eleven o'clock Thursday night until nearly three in the morning! That's what I've come down here to tell you and I don't care what you do to me for helping Mrs. Hill!"

"So you knew she had skipped her bail, did you?" asked the inspector.

"Not till Friday night, but it wouldn't have made any difference to me; she was no thief, no matter what that rich family said about her!—I'm working extra nights, making a wedding dress for one of the girls in the neighborhood and I ran out of white silk thread on Thursday night. I went around to a little shop on Third Avenue that I knew kept open late to get some more, and when I came back I met Mr. Hill in the vestibule and we talked real pleasantly all the way upstairs."

"What time was this?"

"Twenty minutes after eleven by the clock on my mantel when I got back into my own rooms," Miss Hopkins responded promptly. "I know, because I looked particular; I was timing myself on that dress and I knew I'd have to work until near morning. The floors and ceilings in that Lenahan house are as thin as paper and I heard Mr. Hill go into his flat and the sound of their voices talking for hours while he tramped back and forth, shaking my chandelier. I was sewing away so hard that I never realized how late it was getting till I heard him go out again. It surprised me and I looked at the time to find it was five minutes to three. I put away my sewing then and went to bed."

There was a pause during which the inspector's eyes slowly met those of McCarty and what he read there brought a slight flush to his cheek.

"You are prepared to swear that Hill was in his rooms all during the time you mention?"

"Yes, sir."

"How do you know that the man who is charged with the murder of Eugene Creveling is the same man you knew first as Hildreth and then as Hill?" persisted the inspector.

"From the pictures of him that was printed in last night's papers, and this morning's, too; I'd swear to him anywhere," she retorted with spirit.

"What happened Friday night?"

"Well, I was busy putting sleeves in that dress, sir, when along between twelve and one I heard a sound like people going upstairs past my door real soft but I didn't think anything of it. I heard some one groaning, too, but I wouldn't open my door; I never want to get into any neighbors' rows! Then Mrs. Hildreth's door slammed and I heard her running toward the kitchen; she ain't what you might call light-footed!

"I dropped my needle and listened, then, and I heard

a terrible noise all at once; the crash of her door coming down and a lot of pottery breaking. Something hit my kitchen window and I ran in there just in time to see Mrs. Hildreth come down the fire escape. She begged me to hide her, and said it was the police but she hadn't done any wrong and she could explain. That was enough for me, and I hid her, all right!" A little mischievous twinkle came into Miss Hopkins' reddened eyes. "The policeman and your own smart young detective walked all 'round her and never saw her!"

"What do you mean?" Inspector Druet demanded.

"I made a dummy of her!" she replied with evident satisfaction. "There wasn't a place you could hide a cat in my rooms and I was at my wit's end, when all at once I thought of the form—the figure, you know, that I drape dresses on. Quick as a wink I whipped that wedding dress off it, dragged it over and stuck it in the closet and made Mrs. Hildreth stand straight up on the skirt measuring platform. I don't know how I ever got that wedding dress on her for it was an awful tight fit, her being so big, but I managed it somehow, pulling the skirt down over her feet and throwing a sheet over the top of her like I always do over dresses on the form to keep them clean. When the policeman and your detective come through my rooms I was sitting on the floor, stitching away at the hem of that skirt and they never so much as lifted a corner of the sheet!"

McCarthy coughed, but the inspector avoided his eye and asked hastily:

"What happened after they had gone?"

"Nothing. Mrs. Hildreth came down off the platform and told me who she was and the story she's come here to tell you now and nobody knew she was in my rooms until now. Ever since she read in the papers yesterday afternoon that her husband had been arrested for that murder she was near crazy, and this morning she couldn't stand it any

longer, for she knew he would never speak and give away where she was; he'd go to the chair first. She made up her mind to come down here to you and nothing could stop her."

"Is this all true?" The inspector turned once more to the woman before him. "Are you the wife of Frank Hill?"

"Yes, sir; I have brought with me my marriage certificate. It is most certainly true that my husband was at home with me at the time the murder was committed and true also that I did not touch the jewels of Mrs. Creveling. I told all that I knew about that when I was first arrested but what I suspect—" she shrugged. "Who would listen or believe?"

"We'll listen to you, all right," the inspector promised. "Sit down and tell me everything. You are Swedish and called yourself Ilsa Helwig, didn't you, when you went to work at the Crevelings'?"

"Yes, sir, it is my name. I am of German parents but always I have lived in Stockholm. In October I went as housemaid to the Crevelings, and in January I married Frank." She paused and then added: "I have so many times before told my story of what happened the afternoon the emeralds disappeared, but perhaps you do not know. As Mrs. Creveling testified, I was summoned to help her dress for the pageant and had unpacked her costume when she came into the room with the jewel case in her hand. She put it down upon her dressing-table and then Rollins came to say that some one wanted her on the telephone. I had all day such a headache I was nearly crazy and I thought I would have time to slip away to my room and take a powder before Mrs. Creveling returned. I did go up to my room, sir, not downstairs as Mr. Creveling swore; I did not touch the jewel case. But who would believe?"

"Did you go directly back to Mrs. Creveling's dressing-room after you took your medicine?"

"Yes, but she had already returned, sir. No one was

more surprised than I when she opened the jewel case and it was empty, but I—I never thought that I should be accused. I—it stunned me, I was for a time like one dead, and then I began to think, and so did Frank.”

She paused once more and the inspector said impatiently.

“Well, what did you think?”

“Mr. Creveling is dead, sir, and it is not well to speak against those who are gone, but why should he have sworn to a lie about me?” the woman asked simply. “Why did he try to fasten on me the theft instead of doing all he could to find out who really took the emeralds unless he knew the truth and must hide it, no matter who suffered? Yet he could not have been all bad, that man, for who sent to my lawyers the money for my bond?”

The inspector bent forward over his desk.

“You think that Creveling himself took his wife’s emeralds?” he cried. “Will you swear that neither you nor your husband know where the ten thousand came from for your bail?”

“I swear it, sir! It happened exactly as my lawyers told. Frank and I had suspected from the time Mr. Creveling said that which was not true about me, and he did not want me prosecuted from the beginning, you know. That was Mrs. Creveling’s doing; she is of ice, that lady. Ice and iron!—But it does not matter about me. I can prove nothing against Mr. Creveling and she must do with me as she wishes. You have heard my good friend here; her word has cleared my husband of the murder charge, has it not? Oh, will you set him free?”

The inspector sent for Martin and dispatched him with a note to the Commissioner. Then for the first time he addressed McCarty.

“What do you think, Mac?”

McCarty cast a warning glance toward the two women who were conversing together in the corner and replied in low, quick tones:

"I'm thinking I'd like to go to the Tombs with the paper that lets Hill out and have a talk with him."

An hour later, as he made his way over to the gloomy, turreted pile of gray stone, McCarty went carefully in retrospection through the account of the theft which Mrs. Creveling had given him. That she herself had conspired with her husband to make away with her own jewels and place the blame upon the girl was unthinkable, but that Creveling might have abstracted them from the jewel case in the temporary absence of both mistress and maid was another matter. If the woman was to be believed, there was no one else against whom suspicion could be directed, for all the other servants of the household were together downstairs—except the maid who was ill—and they could testify for each other.

Creveling could have taken the jewels while they were in his safe, of course, but in that case no one else could be definitely accused. If Creveling had seen Ilsa slip away after her mistress' departure he might have seized upon the psychological moment to dart across the hall and possess himself of the emeralds, confident, if he considered it at all, that when they were not found in the maid's hands his wife would not press a charge against her. Mrs. Creveling herself had admitted that he did not want to prosecute the girl and then there was the matter of the cash bail; ten thousand does not drop from the skies!

But surely, in spite of his partner's statement as to the shrinkage of his capital, Creveling could not have been brought so low financially that he must steal his own wife's trinkets. . . . Then a sudden thought halted McCarty in the middle of a busy street, to the imminent danger of his neck and the wrath of the traffic policeman. Urged to action by the honk of a motor horn just behind his ear, he sprang mechanically for the curb and continued his way as though in a daze.

Creveling had opened the jewel case when he took it from

the safe to give it to his wife and she had mentioned that she intended to have the stones reset almost immediately, but he had tried to dissuade her from doing so. Had his disapproval been merely because their antique setting appealed to his artistic sense, as Mrs. Creveling said, or had he another reason? Were the stones in those old settings the same ones which she had placed in his charge only a few days before?

There was another problem, too, in McCarty's mind, which bore more directly on the murder but he thrust it for the moment aside. He had felt from the start of the investigation that Hill held a possible key to the mystery if only he could be persuaded to speak; would he break silence now if he might thereby save his wife from going to trial?

When the former valet was ushered into his presence at the Tombs McCarty beamed at him in a guileless, friendly manner.

"Hello, Hill," he began genially. "I guess you knew we couldn't hang that murder charge on you for long, didn't you?"

The man's face was drawn and haggard and he raised burning eyes to meet the clear blue ones which smiled at him.

"What does that matter?" he asked listlessly. "You've found *her*—!"

"I did, but she got away from me Friday night," McCarty said frankly.

"Got away!" Hill clutched suddenly at a chair as if for support.

"She's down at headquarters now; that Hopkins woman on the floor below you has been taking care of her but she gave herself up when she heard that you were charged with Creveling's murder, so that she could prove your alibi. —Here! Buck up, man!"

With a groan Hill had sunk into a chair and covered his face with his thin hands.

"That's why you took me up!" he said. "You did it to make her show herself! Oh, why did she do it? Couldn't she realize that I would rather have anything happen to me than that she should be caught!"

"'Twas the very best thing that she could have done!" McCarty asserted stoutly. "We'd have got her sooner or later and what with her jumping her bail and all it might have looked pretty black against her, but now since she's come clean, Hill, I don't mind telling you that if your wife's story is straight I'm going to back her up. I'm going to see what Creveling himself might have had to do with the stealing of those emeralds!"

For an instant Hill looked up with a gleam of hope in his eyes. Then they darkened sullenly and he shook his head.

"It's only another trick!" he muttered. "Why would any one think that Mr. Creveling would take his wife's jewels? We'd have had no chance to convince people without proof, and Ilsa had better have kept quiet; it'll only go harder with her."

"'Tis no trick!" McCarty protested. "I know that Creveling needed money bad and those stones were worth thirty thousand—"

"Money?" Hill interrupted him in surprise. "Why, we thought he had given them to another—"

He stopped with his lips pressed tightly together, but McCarty finished the sentence for him.

"To another woman, do you mean? Hill, I'm speaking the God's truth when I tell you that if you'll come across with all you know about Creveling I'll do my best to clear your wife of the charge against her and get the indictment quashed. That can only be done by finding the stones or proving who took them and what became of them. I'm willing to say right now that I don't think your wife is guilty, but you'll have to help me prove it. Will you?"

Once more Hill's haggard eyes studied his face and after

a long minute he drew a deep breath and straightened in his chair.

"Yes, sir," he said. "I believe you now, and if you'll only get her free I'll tell you everything I know about Eugene Creveling!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE LETTER

“I’VE found out quite a lot about Mr. Creveling, as it is,” McCarty spoke a trifle grimly. “You told me, Hill, that he’d never touched a card in years, for one thing, but I’ve learned different.”

“You mean those games at Mr. Cutter’s, sir?” Hill paused. “Mr. Creveling was always great for gambling, from the old, wild days when I first came to him before he was married. He’d bet a small fortune on anything, but cards were always a passion with him. He used to run terrific games himself in that study where you found him dead; that’s why he had that high wall built at the back of the house. One of the neighbors on the side street who was trying to get into society and whom Mrs. Creveling had snubbed, could look into the study from her rear windows and she got the police there in her house and tried to have the Crevelings raided one night. I must say it looked like a professional gambling establishment, at that, but Mr. Creveling being so well known he was tipped off and it cost him a mint of money to hush the matter up without scandal that would have reached Mrs. Creveling’s ears. She didn’t know about the games then, sir.”

“She plays now herself,” commented McCarty.

“All their set do, at Mr. Cutter’s. When Mr. Creveling got intimate with him he stopped having games at his own house and their crowd got to meeting regular at Mr. Cutter’s, him being a bachelor and master of his own house.”

“And a professional gambler, at that. Did you know that, Hill?”

“I suspected as much, sir, and more. I’ve heard whispers

that the games weren't altogether straight and that Mr. Creveling and—and one of the other gentlemen knew as much." Hill hesitated. "Butlers and valets and ladies' maids see more than their employers ever stop to think about, and I watched people come and go in their crowd, and they all ended the same; they'd come with a fortune and maybe a beautiful wife that wasn't known as well as she'd like to be in society here, and they'd lose a little and be allowed to win it back, piecemeal, with some more besides and meantime the wife was being taken up and made much of, and soon they'd be living beyond their income, whatever it was, trying to keep up with the procession. Then he'd plunge and lose more and win back more yet, and so they'd play him until he risked everything and lost, and that time there'd be no come-back. Of course, he'd think they were bully good fellows until the showdown, and she'd think she was having the time of her life and getting in with the real people. I've seen all sides of it, sir, and said nothing until now, but if some of the married men only realized the dangers they were exposing their wives to in letting them further their social advancement so—so promiscuous like, with people they really don't know anything about, they'd think twice before they got in with a set of so-called gentlemen gamblers. Mr. Ford was one of the latest that got stung, I hear—but it was Mr. Creveling you wanted me to tell you about!"

"And more than his gambling," McCarty remarked. "I've heard talk of his affairs with women, and of a quarrel with Mr. Waverly not more than a fortnight ago. What do you know about it?"

"Only what the butler, Rollins, told me, sir, and that's not much. Of course, before Mr. Creveling married it was just one affair after another and what with breach of promise and divorce suits threatened or pending, it was a miracle he wasn't shot long ago," Hill said frankly. "I never saw him fall so hard, though, as he did for Miss Alex-

ander, and when they were married I thought he'd settle down; he didn't, for long, but he's been so cautious and discreet that even I couldn't get a line on him. I suppose you think it was funny that I stayed on with him after they'd prosecuted my wife for stealing those jewels, but I had a purpose, sir. She was innocent but they'd done her a dirty trick and I meant to fight him the same way, if I could. You see, I'm giving it to you straight. I stayed to get something on him that I could hold over him and make him either produce those emeralds if he'd taken them himself as we both thought, or else have my wife set free. He had influence enough to do it even after she was indicted if he had wanted to, and I meant to make him want to worse than he had ever wanted anything in his life before! Call it blackmail if you like, sir; my wife was facing prison for something she had never done and I was near crazed with the thought of it. Of course, I would have been dismissed or maybe arrested, too, if they had known that Ilsa and I were man and wife, but we had meant from the start to keep it a secret until spring and then leave and get a little place in the country. I've got quite a bit put by and we were going to open a sort of little tea-place for motorists—"

His voice broke and for a minute he seemed on the point of breaking down, but McCarty waited without speaking, and finally he gathered himself together and went on:

"I knew, even before Rollins told me of the words he had had with Mr. Waverly, that Mr. Creveling had what you might call another affair on; I haven't been with him all these years without learning his moods and I took it that he wasn't receiving any too much encouragement. He was ugly for weeks past and there was no pleasing him, but all at once he changed and began to act as if he owned the earth. Whoever the—the lady was, he must have had reason to think she'd begun to like him."

"Then you don't know who it was?" McCarty asked bluntly. "This is no time for us to be quibbling about

names, Hill; he didn't stop at blackening your wife's. You didn't find out?"

Hill shook his head.

"Then what makes you sure that it was a—a real lady?" McCarty chose his words now with evident care.

"Because he was so extra cautious and secretive. You'd think after all the years I've been with him he would have trusted me a little or made some break that would have given me a line on him, but not he! That's why I knew it must be some one with position, some one in his own set, maybe. It was news to me that Mr. Waverly was jealous, as he must have been from what Rollins overheard. I—I'm quite sure that Mrs. Waverly was not the lady aluded to in that quarrel."

"How did your wife come to jump her bail, Hill?" McCarty asked with seeming irrelevance.

"Well, we talked it over, sir, and it didn't seem that there was a chance for her if she went to trial, so there wasn't anything else to be done. We both hated the thought of it, for it looked like a confession of guilt, but we couldn't either of us face the worse thought of her going to prison. It's no harm to tell you now, for she's safe out of the country, but there was one that was in our confidence and helped us plan the whole thing, even to furnishing up that little flat all ready for us, and that was Mrs. Jarvie, the Crevelings' housekeeper, sir. She'd engaged Ilsa in the beginning, you know, and she thought the world of her and never believed for a minute that she took those jewels, bless her!

"Ilsa's trial was set for about a month ago and when she couldn't be found Mrs. Creveling shut up the house except for Rollins, and Sarah, and me, and went off to Long Island. I thought that with her out of the way Mr. Creveling would maybe show his hand and I stuck to him closer than ever but he didn't, and I was beginning to get desperate! It wasn't till last Thursday morning that I found something out about him, something that wasn't at all what I thought

it would be, but it was enough to bring him to terms, for all that. He was working the same sort of thing on somebody else that I was trying to do to him."

"What do you mean?" McCarty stared.

"Blackmail, if you choose to call it that; anyway, he was holding something over somebody else's head.—He came to the house about ten in the morning from his club and after changing his clothes he went to the telephone and called up Mazzarini, the caterer, and ordered a supper for two sent there that night. I was going through his suit before hanging it up when I found a note in one of the pockets and I read it, sir. The top part was in his own handwriting and it began without any name so I couldn't tell who it was for, but the meaning was plain enough. It was a command for some one to come there that night and talk things over, and although it was worded politely enough there was a threat between every line if you had eyes to see it! He had signed it with just one initial—'C.'—and the person who got it had written seven words underneath and sent it back to him."

"What were those seven words?" demanded McCarty.

"I accept. Expect me half-past twelve," Hill quoted slowly. "I didn't know the writing and there wasn't even an initial signed to the answer, but I stuck it in my pocket quick. I'd heard him tell Rollins and Sarah that they could clear out until next day and I thought that meant that I was to serve the supper, and my time had come at last! He said he expected a gentleman guest for supper and ordered me to wait at the house and arrange the table and take the stuff from the caterer's men, and then bring a freshly pressed Tuxedo to the club at eleven o'clock. I did, thinking of course that I was to return, and I could have cursed him to his face when he told me I needn't show up until the next day.

"I went home to the little flat where Ilsa was hiding and we talked it over. The note that I'd kept was enough if it

was handled right to make him clear Ilsa's name by bluffing his wife some way and giving out that the jewels were found even if he couldn't produce them, but if I knew who the man was that was coming I'd have Creveling so he couldn't even squirm. He had put through more than one shady business transaction at those little midnight suppers of his before, and I knew this must be nearer blackmail than the others, if he wouldn't have one of us there even to serve the supper. It meant I'd be discharged if he caught me in the house when he'd told me to stay away, but I made up my mind at last to go back and risk it. It was almost three o'clock but usually those conferences were all-night affairs and I hoped to get just one look at his guest without being seen.

"The house was all lighted up but I didn't think anything of that, and let myself in with my own key at the tradesmen's entrance. I kept as quiet as I could for fear Mr. Creveling should discover me and it was well for me that I did, for I heard heavy footsteps and men's voices in the kitchen and I had barely time to dodge into the scullery when they came out and started down to the cellar; a policeman that I recognized as the one on night duty around that beat, and two men in plain clothes.

"I turned cold, for it came to me right away that something had happened to Mr. Creveling, and the letter I'd found might be of no use in freeing Ilsa, after all! As soon as they had gone down the cellar steps I hurried around to the main hall and looked into the breakfast room and then the study. There lay Mr. Creveling, dead!"

"Hill"—McCarty interrupted the story—"did that gun beside him belong to Mr. Creveling?"

The valet shook his head.

"I never saw it before, sir, and I didn't notice it particularly then. I was staring down at the place where his face had been, and I almost went crazy for a moment thinking of Ilsa and that her last chance had gone!"

"What did you do then?" McCarty asked. "Think carefully, Hill. Did you touch anything in the room? Did you see any playing cards or anything lying around?"

"I don't have to think!" the other responded. "I'll never forget that scene as long as I live! I didn't see any playing cards or anything except just Mr. Creveling's body and I wouldn't have soiled my hands by touching it for the world! I don't know how long I stood there with my brain whirling, but it couldn't have been more than a minute or two, and then I began to think fast. I saw I had two strings left to my bow, after all. One was to find the man that had been there and shot Creveling and hold what I knew over his head to make him help me, as he could have if he knew Mrs. Creveling and had any influence with her; the other was to get Mrs. Creveling and her uncle there together as quick as I could and offer to hush things up if they'd set Ilsa free. I knew that she'd stopped caring for her husband long ago—hated him, in fact—and I thought she would want to prevent scandal and notoriety before anything else, just as Mr. Alexander would. He would be glad enough that Creveling was out of the way so he could handle the estate to suit himself."

"You didn't stop to think that it might have been suicide?"

Hill laughed shortly.

"Not knowing Mr. Creveling the way I did! He wouldn't have had the—the guts to do it, sir! It takes long to tell it but I just thought it all out in a flash. I could only find out who had been there that night by tracing the writing at the bottom of that note and I knew Mr. Creveling kept a lot of private letters in that secret drawer in his desk. Of course I'd been through it often enough before, having watched when he didn't know it to see how he worked the spring, but some of the letters were from gentlemen whose names were strange to me and I hadn't taken notice of the writing. Then I remembered that there would be a thorough search made for clues all over the house, and it came

to me—what if Mrs. Jarvie had left a stray letter or memorandum or something in her desk that would show where Ilsa was hiding? She was an old lady and though close-mouthed was given to scribbling notes and diaries and such. I supposed, of course, that the policeman and the other two were the only living men in the house besides myself and I started upstairs, when all of a sudden you and the inspector came out of Mr. Creveling's room. I sprang back quick or you would have seen me. When you had gone on to the next floor I slipped into Mr. Creveling's room, put on a pair of his gloves so that my finger marks wouldn't show and, opening the little drawer, I took out the letters.

"I hoped against hope that I could sneak into the housekeeper's room before you got around to it in your search but you nearly caught me on the stairs a second time and I had to wait until you had gone down again. I knew that she used to hide the spare key to her desk behind a loose brick up in the fireplace and chanced that she had forgotten and left it there, which she had done. Her old household account books were in the desk together with a stack of loose papers and I had to take the lot for I had no time to sort them out. I don't know how I ever got out of the house without being seen, but I heard you all talking in the room where Mr. Creveling's body was lying and I slipped out and made for home, where Ilsa was.

"She looked over the housekeeper's books and papers and sure enough, there were the receipts for some of the furniture of our little flat, that I'd given Mrs. Jarvie the money to pay for, with the address scribbled on it to where the stuff was to be delivered, so Ilsa burned the lot. I read over the notes I had taken from Mr. Creveling's desk and compared them with those seven words written at the bottom of his letter. None of them were in the same hand, but I kept two or three for Mrs. Creveling to buy with Ilsa's freedom; they showed plain that Mr. Creveling had

been threatening people to make them pay up card debts or lend him money, and if they ever got in the newspapers she wouldn't have been able to hold up her head again. It seems rotten to fight a woman like that, maybe, sir, but she hadn't spared Ilsa!

"When I'd destroyed the letters that didn't mean anything to me I put the rest in my pocket together with that one I had taken from Mr. Creveling's clothes in the morning, and went to the corner drugstore and called up Mr. Alexander; I altered my voice so he wouldn't recognize it, and you know what I told him. Then I went straight back to the Creveling house and hid those letters. I heard Mr. Alexander come in and then I knocked on the door of the breakfast room."

"Who telephoned out to Broadmead? It was your wife, wasn't it?" asked McCarty.

"Yes. I told her to give the message to a servant and to pretend that she was the Crevelings' cook. You know the rest, sir. You could have knocked me down with a feather when I saw the way Mrs. Creveling took the news and how possessed she was to find out who had shot her husband, but I might have known she would be that way, she was so set on punishing Ilsa. I haven't found out yet who the man was that had supper with Mr. Creveling and then killed him, but I've still those letters to hold over Mrs. Creveling's head, only now it won't be any use."

"Nor any need, I hope," McCarty remarked. "Where did you hide those letters, Hill?"

The valet hesitated for a fraction of a second and then threw out his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"In a niche in the upper hall near Mr. Creveling's door there's a teakwood stand with one of those queer Chinese vases on it that he was always so crazy about. Lift off the vase, sir, and you'll see that the little marble slab that's set in the top of the stand is loose; the letters are under that."

"Well," McCarty rose. "I'm going now to see about getting you out of here and over to headquarters where your wife is waiting to see you. We'll have to hold her—you understand that, of course, for she wouldn't be admitted to bail again even if it should drop from the skies a second time, but the inspector will see that things are made as easy as possible for her and we'll do all we can to have her trial put off. I won't go back on my promise, Hill. I'm going to do my best to dig up some evidence that will kill that indictment."

An hour later he presented himself at the Creveling house and his eyes twinkled at the austerity of Rollins' bow.

"If you wish to see Mrs. Creveling, sir, the doctor says that she is not to be disturbed, even by the police," that worthy announced with dignity. "'E says 'e'll be responsible to the authorities, sir."

"That's all right. I didn't come to see her," McCarty responded, adding slyly: "Surprised you, didn't it, Rollins, that arrest we made yesterday?"

"I am not surprised at anything the police does, sir," Rollins remarked. "From the way this case 'as been 'andled, it wouldn't amaze me if Sarah or me was to be took up next!"

McCarty chuckled.

"Then you don't think that Hill shot Mr. Creveling? No more do I, but orders are orders!—Is Mr. Alexander here?"

"Not yet, sir." Rollins unbent a trifle. "'E telephoned that 'e would be 'ere in an hour, and 'e must consult with Mrs. Creveling; 'e wouldn't take 'no' for an answer—"

The butler hesitated somewhat uncertainly and McCarty asked:

"Did he say what he wanted to see her about, Rollins?"

"Well, sir, 'e did mention something about that other gentleman that was called in; Mr. Terhune. 'E was so excited that I couldn't rightly make out what 'e meant but 'is language to me was most unusual; shocking, I'd call it, in a

man of 'is years! I gathered that 'e didn't regard Mr. Terhune very 'ighly and wanted 'im off the case."

McCarty nodded appreciatively.

"I shouldn't wonder. I'll wait here for Mr. Alexander." He seated himself in the nearest chair and ostentatiously pulling a newspaper from his coat pocket he spread its ample pages before him. Then as the butler still lingered he added: "Don't let me be keeping you from your work, Rollins."

The other opened his lips to speak, but thought better of it and with a nod retired to the pantry. McCarty waited for a few moments, then tossed his paper aside and crossing the hall with noiseless tread he gently closed the door through which Rollins had passed, and, turning, crept up the main stairway.

There in the hall by Creveling's door, upon its stand of carved black wood stood a squat, bulging vase upon which a grotesque dragon in dull red and gold appeared to be endlessly chasing his own tail. From 'behind the closed door leading to Mrs. Creveling's apartments across the hall came the murmur of feminine voices and McCarty wasted no time in admiration of the specimen of ancient art. Unceremoniously lifting the vase off the stand, he placed it on the rug and examined the small circular inset of pinkish marble upon which it had rested. It moved slightly beneath his fingers and pulling out his pen-knife he pried up one edge. There in a shallow recess beneath lay a thin packet of letters held together by a rubber band.

Two minutes later the vase was back in its accustomed place and McCarty, with an expression upon his countenance not unlike that supposed to have been worn by the celebrated cat that ate the canary, was letting himself silently out the front door.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NAME IN THE BOOK

"IT'S a pity you could not have stopped by for me on your way down to headquarters, the day!" Dennis observed reproachfully as late that afternoon he stretched out his lanky form in McCarty's comfortably dilapidated arm-chair. "Well you knew I was off duty until six this evening and then on solid for twenty-four hours! I'd have liked first rate to have seen Martin's face when he found how the dressmaker had tricked him with the Hill woman inside that wedding gown instead of the dummy!"

"I only went down to report to the inspector, not thinking Mrs. Hill would show up so soon," McCarty explained. "But what do you think of those letters I found where Hill had hid them under the vase?"

He had recounted to his companion the tale of the morning's adventures, and of all that he had learned about Cutter's establishment and those who frequented it, ending with his visit to the Creveling house, and spread the letters out on the desk before him.

"I'm thinking," Dennis observed, "that our fine gentleman, Mr. Creveling, was a crook and a blackguard, and he must have been flirting with that bullet a good while before it finally got him. But all this don't lead you any nearer to who fired it, Mac. You've enough to do finding him without chasing after those emeralds, too."

"I've given my word," McCarty responded soberly. "Hill is the sly fox, but that galoot of a wife of his, for all she's a fine figure of a woman, is too stupid to be anything but honest and if Creveling framed her it's up to me to get her off. As for the shooting, I've my own ideas about that

and I'm not springing them on even you yet, Denny. What do you make of the handwriting of those seven words that were added at the bottom of Creveling's letter and sent back to him?"

"If I was Terhune now, with his little magnifying glasses, I might be able to tell you the color of the guy's hair that wrote it, and the maiden name of both his grandmothers, but being as I'm not it's little I make of it at all!" Dennis regarded the double sheet of note paper critically. "I'd never say, though, that he was the lad to murder anybody for all the letters are kind of bold and dashing.—See the way that one straggles and this bit of a blot where the ink dropped off the end of the pen? The hand that held the pen was shaking, Mac, but the one that held the gun didn't."

"True for you." McCarty folded the letters thoughtfully and put them in his pocket. "But it may have been the same hand for all that. It could have shook from excitement or anger beforehand yet been steady enough when the time came to act. But I've more to tell you, Denny: there are so many loose ends to this case that I made up my mind I'd give this day to pulling out of the tangle and one of them led straight back here, under this very roof!"

"Here?" Dennis glanced around him at the shabby, home-like room as though he expected something sinister to rear its head in the familiar surroundings.

"To the musty old shop of the little Frenchman downstairs," McCarty went on. "Do you mind I told you that when I had the interview with Mrs. Kip on Friday I had a kind of an idea I couldn't shake off that I'd seen her before, and not so long ago, at that? I could not place her and it's been bothering me till this afternoon when I went to see her again. While I was waiting for her to come down I looked around the reception room a bit and what did I see but an old cabinet with long-legged birds carved on it and lettering like a laundry ticket in one corner, and I knew it as well as I know the chair you're sitting in this minute,

Denny; many's the time I saw it in old Girard's shop below, when I went in to have a bit of a smoke with him of an evening, and he told me there was not another like it in the country. Then all at once it come to me that 'twas there I'd seen her on a night not a month ago, and I called to mind that there had been a man in a big fur coat with her and a car outside. I did not get sight of his face but the car was a long, low, open runabout with an engine like a racer and I recalled thinking how unseasonable it was with the snow and all. I remember her, too, because she was dressed so funny; a little hat with a long veil and a heavy enough motoring coat, but the coat was open and underneath it she had on an evening dress you could have made from a lace handkerchief and had some to spare."

"Did you ask Girard if he knew who the fellow was?" asked Dennis eagerly.

"He's gone away for the day, but I'll see him to-night," McCarty responded. "By the time Mrs. Kip had made up her mind she'd see me this afternoon I'd worked up an interest in antiques and Chink cabinets in particular that would have done credit to Girard himself. The first thing I asked her was where that one had come from and she said a friend had brought it to her straight from the Orient; that was answer enough for me to get it that she was afraid to drag in that man with the fur coat.—I gave it to her strong then that I knew she'd lied about her whereabouts on Thursday night at the time Creveling was killed."

"And what happened?" Dennis sat bolt upright in his chair. "Did she come across with the truth? Where—?"

"She did not!" McCarty interrupted grimly. "I've seen many a woman in a temper but never the beat of her! The half of it was put on; I could see that; for in the midst of her hysterics she was studying me with an eye as cold as a fish to see how I was taking it and if she was stalling me any. She's a born gambler, that Mrs. Kip, but she hasn't learned when to bluff and when to lay down her cards. She

stuck to it that she'd gone to bed early and her maid could prove it, and that 'twas the day before that she'd fallen on the rug and hurt her arm."

"And what did the maid say?" demanded Dennis.

McCarty shrugged.

"What would any girl say that had a soft berth and was afraid of losing it?" he retorted. "The minute Mrs. Kip called her in I could see she had her story all fixed and 'twas a waste of time to even listen to it. When she'd left the room I remarked to Mrs. Kip that I supposed her companion Miss Frost would corroborate it and when she said 'Yes' I asked her to write out the address in Chicago that Miss Frost had gone to."

"And what was the good of that when you knew all the time that Miss Frost was no more in Chicago than we are this minute?"

For answer McCarty pulled a folded slip of paper from his pocket.

"To get a look at her handwriting."

Dennis' eyes bulged.

"Mac, you don't think 'twas a woman—?"

"I'm no expert, and those seven words might have been written by a woman," McCarty replied guardedly.

"And some man kept the appointment for her!" Dennis finished. "Let's have a look at that slip."

McCarty passed it over and his companion scrutinized it doubtfully.

"It might be the same, at that," he said at last as he returned it. "Especially if the writing at the bottom of Crevelling's note was disguised a bit, as it likely was, seeing that not even an initial was signed to it. Did you get any answer to that advertisement you put in the papers about Mrs. Kip's fur neck piece?"

"Not up to yesterday afternoon when I called at the *Bulletin* office." McCarty rose. "It's half-past five. Come and I'll have an early bite with you before you go back on duty,

for no lunch did I have, and I'm going to drop in at the O'Rourkes' and come home after to talk to Girard."

"The O'Rourkes', is it?" Dennis asked as he reached for his hat. "'Tis high society you're moving in these days."

"I knew them in the old country when she was a baby and he just a broth of a boy, as I'm after telling you," McCarty remarked. "If there's a drop of the old blood in him, Cutter and his crowd will strip him of his last cent and him thinking all the time that the game is a straight one and them as clean sports as he. I'd not butt in now, but they may scent scandal and exposure coming and make a killing off him before they beat it. I've an idea that Waverly is four-flushing financially just the way Creveling was, and is in on a percentage of Cutter's games. Anyway, I'll not let 'the' O'Rourke be stung if a word in his ear will save him!"

But when McCarty stood in the genial, democratic presence of John Cavanaugh O'Rourke he did not find it so easy to utter that saving word. Adroitly he turned the conversation from the mystery of Creveling's death to a discussion of his friends and heard a eulogy of Nicholas Cutter which left him at a loss as to how to proceed upon his mission. After all, "the" O'Rourke was a gentleman and McCarty had been but a gawky, out-at-elbows lout, bred of the farms and byres. Would the former listen to a word from such a source against one who, though a scamp and a scoundrel, was nevertheless of aristocratic stock? The ex-groundsman drew a deep breath and plunged.

"You were good enough when I talked with you last, sir, to say I should let you know if there was any way you could help to clear up the matter of Mr. Creveling's death. Will you answer me one question, not to be repeated to the inspector but as man to man?"

"Of course, Timmie." The old name came instinctively to O'Rourke's lips. "If that valet Hill, whom you have arrested—?"

"Hill has been let go again. We took him on the murder charge for another purpose entirely and it worked." McCarty paused. "The question I wanted to ask you was about Mr. Cutter. I know he's of a fine old family and you think he is a friend of yours—"

"'Think'?" O'Rourke caught him up quickly. "He's the best pal in the world!"

"So a lot more have thought, sir, until they left his card table with nothing but the clothes they stood in." McCarty met with a steady gaze the fire which flashed suddenly in the other's eyes. "I know all about those little games of his, you see, and I suppose you'll be ready to kick me out but 'tis only because of the old days I'm speaking now. Did it ever occur to you, sir, that they were being run crooked?"

For a moment it seemed that O'Rourke's anger would burst forth but he turned away instead with a forced laugh.

"You're away off, Timmie! Nick Cutter is a thorough sportsman all the way through and his play is dead on the level. Of course he wouldn't care to have it published broadcast that a few of his intimate friends meet as a regular thing at his house for a gentlemen's game, because of the beastly notoriety and your ubiquitous police system over here; he might actually be raided! I suppose you've been talking to some cad who lost and then beefed about it. Cutter wouldn't ask a chap of that sort to sit in but a man doesn't always know his friends."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, sir. A man can't always tell whether people are on the square or playing him for a sucker. I've heard more than one ugly report concerning him in the last few days but I've said nothing at headquarters." McCarty added slyly: "I like a hand or two at poker myself now and then, and I'm not regularly connected with the department any more, you know. 'Tis none of my business to go bleating about a gentlemen's

game and spoil their sport. I only wanted to warn you in case anything might be wrong."

"Thanks, old man, but there's no need." O'Rourke's good-nature was completely restored and now his merry, boyish eyes twinkled with a sudden inspiration. "Tell you what I'll do to convince you; I'll take you along and stand sponsor for you at the next game if you like. Cutter won't mind as long as you are there unofficially and you can see for yourself that everything is as right as can be. I'll stake you—"

"I'd like to take you up on that some time sir, but I'll buy my own chips," McCarty said with a chuckle which covered his own satisfaction at having gained his point. "If I lose I'll not be squealing at headquarters about it, but raising the rents again on my tenants.—By the way, you played there last Tuesday night, didn't you?"

"Yes. Why?" O'Rourke asked. "That was the last time I saw 'Gene Creveling alive."

"Mr. and Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Baillie Kip and Mr. Waverly were there too, weren't they?" persisted McCarty.

"Yes." There was a puzzled look in O'Rourke's gray eyes.

"That made eight of you, all told."

"Yes, but we didn't all play. I mean, not at the same time," O'Rourke amended. "Creveling dropped out early and Waverly took his hand."

"I see. Then they didn't sit in the same game together. Have they for the past couple of weeks?"

"I don't remember. I don't think they have, at that.—What the devil are you getting at, Timmie?"

"Just this, sir. Did they speak at all to each other on Tuesday night?" McCarty asked bluntly. "Have you heard nothing about there being bad blood between them lately?"

"Why—no." O'Rourke paused reflectively. "I've heard nothing about any quarrel and they were usually thicker

than thieves, but it's funny about Tuesday night. They did not speak at all, now that I remember! Creveling was away ahead of the game but he threw down his cards and cashed in just after Waverly came. Cutter was banking, of course, and while he settled up with Creveling, Waverly talked to Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Kip. Then when Creveling had said a general good night and gone, Waverly dropped into his chair and the game went on.—I say, though, you don't mean that they could have had a serious quarrel! That any one has been trying to connect Waverly with— with what happened to Creveling? It's utterly absurd—!"

"Oh, no!" McCarty interrupted hastily. "We know where Mr. Waverly was all Thursday night, even if there had been any suspicion against him. There's been some talk of a quarrel, though, that involved somebody else and we had to look into it, of course.—Well, I'll be getting along, now, sir. If Mr. Cutter and the other gentlemen don't mind, I'd like mighty well to sit in one of their games. 'Twould be something to remember."

"Oh, Cutter'll be glad to have you; you'd be a friend at court, you know, if your colleagues at headquarters got inquisitive about what was being pulled off, and if a friend of mine from the old country wasn't welcome to play with the rest I'd quit the game myself!" O'Rourke laughed. "But come and say hello to Margaret before you go; she's writing letters in her own little sitting-room but she'll not take it kindly if you leave without a word with her."

The apartment into which McCarty was ushered was hung all in pale, cool greens with great bowls of jonquils standing all about and Lady Peggy appeared to his enraptured gaze very like a spring flower herself in her softly flowing lavender robe as she looked up from her desk and held out her little hand with a smile of welcome.

"Good evening, Mr. McCarty. When are you coming to dine with us as you promised?" she asked. "We've years of friendship that wasn't lost but just mislaid to pick up

again, you know, and I'm hungry for a talk about the home people and the home land."

McCarty flushed redly and his eyes fell. It was a minute before he found his voice.

"Thank you kindly, Lady Peggy. I'd be honored to come sometime when you've an evening to spare and my work is done," he stammered. "There's none of my own left in the old country now, and 'tis long since I stopped writing, so I'll have to ask the news of you."

"I'll have plenty for you!" she smiled. "Do you remember Father Culhane? I hear from him regularly and he gives me all the gossip of the parish, from the price of pigs to the latest baby!"

Ten minutes of pleasant chatter followed and then McCarty tore himself determinedly away to get to the shop beneath his rooms before Monsieur Girard had retired for the night. He found a light glowing dimly from the rear but the door was bolted and he rapped smartly upon the glass panel.

Mincing footsteps sounded from within and a withered little man opened the door and peered out.

"Ah, it is you, my friend! *Entrez!*" He bowed jerkily and waved with a grand manner toward the back of the shop, where behind faded brocade curtains which once had graced the boudoir of a king's favorite he had arranged a sort of study for himself. Here was his Voltaire and his box of long, slender, odoriferous cigars, his chess-board and the 'cello from which haunting strains rose now and again to McCarty's rooms, to fill him with sentimental melancholy or lively exasperation, according to his mood. Here, too, Monsieur Girard kept his shop accounts and entertained the few who came to see him, for he was an old man and lonely.

"Say, Girard, a funny thing happened to-day!" McCarty began. "I came to tell you about it earlier but you were away."

"Out to the cemetery." Monsieur Girard pulled a second chair up to the grate where a scant handful of coals were glowing. "Sit close, for there is still the chill of winter in the air. My bones, they felt it out there in the damp of new-turned earth!—But what has happened to-day?"

"I ran across a piece of yours: that old Chinese cabinet with birds on it! That is, if you were telling me the truth about it when you said it was the only one of its kind in this country," he added craftily.

"It is the only one of its kind in existence, my friend!" the old man retorted with dignity. "Why do you doubt?"

"Because I understood the lady to say that it had been brought to America for her."

"Ah, these new-rich!" Monsieur Girard shrugged expressively. "They will make up the fairy tale to aggrandize themselves, is it not so? If you saw my cabinet Chinois you must have been at the house of Madame Baillie Kip. It does not surprise me, Monsieur McCarty; you must have seen other beautiful things from my shop here during the last few days, only you did not chance to recognize them."

"I did?" McCarty stared. "You've been reading about the Creveling case, haven't you?—You don't mean to say that he was a customer of yours!"

"He and several of his friends." The old man shook his head. "It is very sad. Monsieur Creveling has been coming to my shop for two or three years past; not often, you comprehend, but when he did come it was usually for something of rare value. It was he who purchased that cabinet for Madame Kip."

Across McCarty's mental vision there flashed again the man in the fur coat and he asked:

"How long ago? It seems to me I saw that cabinet here only lately."

"No, my friend. It is six months, at the least.—But wait, I will tell you to the day." He rose and going to the high

spindle-legged desk he took a small, flat volume from a drawer and ruffled its pages. "Ah, here it is! Monsieur Creveling purchased it for Madame Kip on the twentieth of October. Before that I had sent to her from him a scent bottle and a fan or two—mere bijouterie. The cabinet was his first gift to her of value and his last! Shall I tell you? It is indiscreet, perhaps, that I gossip now, but it is a piquant little *histoire* which might have come from the pages of De Maupassant!"

He paused with a reminiscent smile and McCarty, who gathered only that he was on the trail of some new dope which would be of possible use in the case, sat up straighter in his chair.

"Let's have it, Girard. He quit making presents to her, do you mean? Why?"

"That is the *histoire*, Monsieur McCarty. Madame Kip, she have no knowledge of the *artistique*, no love of beautiful things as have most women, even of the people; it is the price only to her which matters! If a thing is of expense, *voilà*, it is to be desired; if it is exquisite but of little value in money, she has not eyes to see!" There was immeasurable scorn in his voice. "It is a month after the gift of the cabinet to her that Madame comes to me and brings back the two fans; she must have money, I must sell them for her. Eh, bien, that is to me an affair of business, but when I tell her their value she flies into a rage! She had thought them worth much more and she accuses me of trying to cheat her! I refuse then to sell them for her, I show her to the door, but she makes the apology and in the end leaves them for what they may bring.

"Not two days later Monsieur Creveling comes; he desires to know if I have found for him a vase to match one which he has, and when my back is turned he sees the fans in the case! He asks how it is that they are there and me, what can I say? I cannot make of myself in his eyes a receiver of stolen goods! He buys them, giving me twice

what I asked, twice what he paid before, and takes them away, but his smile, it is not pleasant!

"I send the money to Madame Kip, saying only that it is the price which I have received for her fans but the next day she is here once more and this time her anger, it is affreuse! She says that I have 'sold her out' but I do not comprehend; it is only her fans that I have sold! Alors, Monsieur Creveling sends no more bijouterie to Madame from my shop! It is droll, is it not?"

"It is that!" McCarty laughed, but his quick brain was piecing together the story, fitting it into the mosaic of fact and theory which he had formed. "Girard, you old devil, I'll bet you did it on purpose!—But she's still a customer of yours, isn't she? Didn't I see her in here after closing hours one night not a month ago? She had on an evening dress with a motoring cloak thrown over it and she came in an open car with a man in a fur coat."

Monsieur Girard nodded.

"It was she. Another friend of hers who is an occasional customer told her of a snuff-box which had just reached me from France. It was of gold set with amethysts of rare color and said to be of the time of Louis the Just, and since there could be no doubt of its value, Madame must have it! It was purchased for her that night, Monsieur, by the man in the fur coat."

"And who was he?" McCarty asked. "Didn't you know him, too? Didn't you get his name?"

"But, yes. He gave me a check and it was under his name that I recorded the sale here in my book." He turned again to the flat volume and ran through its pages rapidly. "Here, Monsieur McCarty! Come, you shall see it for yourself."

McCarty rose with alacrity and crossing to his host, bent over the ledger and read the name written there in Monsieur Girard's small, fine hand. The next minute he started back in amazement.

"For the love of the Saints!" he ejaculated. "And 'twas not a month ago! Think of your putting it down in your little book, so neat and certain! Many's the time I've thought to myself that it was the poor business man you were, with everything higgledy-piggledy in your shop and dust that you could scrape off with a knife, but I'll take it all back! Keep that little book safe, Girard, for it may be of more use than you know!"

CHAPTER XIX

GREEN FIRE

McCARTY'S long years of training on the Force had enabled him as a matter of habit to put aside whatever cases he was engaged upon and mechanically compose himself for slumber when the time for needed rest came, but that Sunday night was an exception and he lay wide-eyed until dawn. As he tossed and turned and thumped his pillow in exasperation he seemed to be wrestling with some almost personal problem which confronted him, and no small phase of it was his promise to Hill to help clear his wife of the charge against her.

The first light of morning revealed him haggard and with a grayish pallor overspreading his usually ruddy, cheerful countenance, but the firm set of his square jaw betokened that he had arrived at some decision and characteristically he rose to act upon it at once.

At headquarters he found that Inspector Druet had already preceded him and the latter's morose greeting attested to taut nerves and the bitterness of acknowledged failure.

"You saw the papers, Mac?" he demanded. "The *Bulletin* is the loudest of all in its outcry against us for charging Hill with the murder and then having to let him go again on the strength of his alibi. And you gave that young pup Ballard the beat on it Saturday! That's gratitude for you! We get no credit at all for finding Ilsa Helwig."

"And since when are you looking for gratitude from the press, or even recognition?" McCarty shrugged. "Sure, the loss of the emeralds and that girl's jumping her bail

are lost sight of in all the excitement about the murder, and small wonder."

"Well, if we're at a standstill it is some satisfaction to know that Terhune is, too!" A smile of grim humor twitched the inspector's mouth. "George Alexander is too proud to explain publicly why that pistol belonging to the bookkeeper was in his possession or I believe he would prefer a charge of criminal libel against our celebrated scientific criminologist."

"At that 'twas not a bad case he made out against him," remarked McCarty.

"Only it fell down flat. We found that taxi driver yesterday afternoon; the one with the scarred face who drove Alexander home from Columbus Circle. He substantiates his story all right, and Terhune is hiding his sulks behind his usual calmly superior air. I saw him last night and he intimated that he had something fresh up his sleeve."

"Well, so have we." McCarty smiled. "We're not at a standstill yet, sir."

"There's nothing up my sleeve but my arm," the inspector admitted frankly. "Every suspect we get in the case seems to have an alibi pat.—Have you doped out anything since yesterday?"

"I lost a good night's sleep over it, sir, but maybe 'twas not wasted after all." McCarty drew a chair up to the desk and seated himself. "I was that twisted and turned in the case that I went back to first principles and thought over everything in my mind from the minute I saw that Bodansky lad skulking along ahead of me on the Avenue, and I got an idea. What have you done with him?"

"Bodansky?" The inspector looked across at his colleague in surprise. "He's up in the precinct station house waiting to be charged with attempted burglary."

"Will you send for him, sir? I'll explain while he's on the way down. I want to ask him a few questions along a different line than we took with him before."

Inspector Druet pressed the buzzer in his desk and when his subordinate appeared, briefly gave the order. Then as the door closed once more he sat back in his chair.

"Go on. What's the idea? Don't try to have him charged, Mac, with a crime we can't prove on him or this time the press will howl for my official head!"

"They've howled for it more than once before, sir, but it hasn't fallen yet!" McCarty grinned affectionately at his chief and then his face grew serious. "I'm not going to bring any charge whatever against the young crook, but instead with your permission I'm going to tell him we'll let him down as easy as we can if he'll come across with a little information."

"'Information'?" the inspector repeated with raised eyebrows. "Didn't I have him on the carpet down here for three hours on Friday? Your own statement proves that he couldn't have fired that shot, and he beat it the minute he found the body."

"Yes, but why did he pick on the Creveling house in the first place?" McCarty asked suddenly. "He was not just sauntering along looking for a likely lay when I saw him first; he was on the job and knew where he was going, you can bet on that! He said it was his first trick and he only tried to turn it to prove to the rest of the gang that he was all there, but you know from experience yourself, sir, that the yellowest crook will keep faith with his bunch if he's got the fear of God in him."

"What do you mean?" the inspector asked. "You don't think he was working alone then?"

"Alone, maybe, but he was not wandering along the Avenue looking for the first open window to crawl through! I don't say he was working under orders but he'd either been tipped off or else he'd found out there were valuables in the house and it is not any too well guarded just now. *Something* steered him toward Creveling, sir, and I'm going to have it out of him!"

But when Bodansky was brought in he did not at first find the matter as simple as he had anticipated. The young gangster seated himself docilely enough on the edge of the chair to which the inspector pointed a peremptory hand and his small, rat-like eyes darted swiftly from one to the other of the two determined faces before him, but he carried himself with an air of self-assurance which had been lacking in the first encounter.

"Look here, Joe, I suppose you know you're in for a stretch?" McCarty began impressively when a glance from Inspector Druet put the interrogation into his hands.

Bodansky grinned foolishly, but the gleam of shrewdness lingered in his gaze.

"I ain't done nottin'," he averred doggedly. "'Course I had de gat an' de jack an' de keys on me, but it's a foist offense, barrin' dat stretch in de reform'tory an' I'll get off light."

"What makes you think so?" demanded McCarty. "Do you suppose your gang would bother to have any wires pulled to get you off, you poor little runt of a white-livered piker? That Lexington Avenue gang of cheap crooks have only been kidding you if you think they stand in with the ward boss, let alone anybody higher up."

"I ain't kickin'," vouchsafed Bodansky, slumping comfortably forward in his chair with his bullet head outthrust between his hunched shoulders like that of a turtle. "I'm willin' to take whatever youse can hand me. I didn't have nottin' to do wit' croakin' Crawford—"

"Crawford?" McCarty caught him up sharply. "So you knew Creveling as 'Crawford,' eh?"

The slumped figure stiffened suddenly and the rat eyes shifted but he drawled:

"Creveling, was it? It's all de same to me. I t'ought youse called him 'Crawford' dat night, an' I ain't been read-in' de poipers regular since!"

He grinned again but his lips trembled and he raised a slack hand to cover them.

McCarty seized the opportunity which the final remark presented.

"If you had, you'd have known better than to take that line with us, Joe. We're on to it that Creveling was known as 'Crawford' sometimes, and why, but we didn't think you were in on that deal. You'll go up for something more than attempted burglary now, my gossoon!"

A shade of terror darkened the pasty face and Joe Bodansky writhed in his chair.

"I dunno what youse mean!" he whined. "Honest t'Gawd I never heard of dat guy till I saw him lyin' dere wit' his face gone! If he was known as 'Crawford' youse must've said so den an' dat's how I got it! Honest t'Gawd—!"

McCarty turned to the dumfounded inspector and asked cryptically:

"Shall we get the other one over from the Tombs and face 'em, sir? We've got it now that the big fellow was holding out on us about Joe here, and when he knows Joe give him away—!"

A thin wailing cry broke in upon him and Bodansky, shivering with fright, turned imploringly to the inspector.

"I ain't no snitcher! I didn't give him away! What are youse trying to frame me for? If youse get him over an' he t'inks I spilled on him youse had better send me up for life, for he'll see dat I'm croaked de foist time I show me face in de street! I ain't in on his game, on my modder I ain't! He don't even know I'm wise to it!"

"Then come clean!" the inspector advised grimly. "Tell us how you knew Creveling was Crawford?"

"It was all on account of dat skirt I got stuck on," Bodansky admitted with evident reluctance. "I told youse de Gawd's trut' when I said dat I'd never turned a trick before de night youse nabbed me comin' out of dat window,

but I stood in wit' de gang an' got my bit when dey pulled off anyt'ing, see? About two mont's ago a guy was rolled over on Madison Avenue; oh, I didn't have anyt'ing to do wit' dat part of it, an' I don't know who did de rollin' so I ain't afraid to open me trap about it! Anyhow, when de split was made in Hogan's back room I dragged down twenty iron men an' de foist't'ing I t'ought of was a gold bracelet wit' red stones in it over across de way in Kosakoff's window. Me goil had been lookin' at it an' hintin' around dat de guy dat owns de candy store where she works would get it for her.—Say, how did youse get on to Kosakoff, anyhow? He don't even run a hock shop like most of de odder fences do, an' dat ticker repairin' job is a hell of a good blind."

He paused and the inspector shook his head, carefully avoiding McCarty's quizzical gaze.

"It's nothing to you how we get our dope, Joe. Go on with your story, and mind you give it to us straight!"

"De minute I got mine I beat it across de street to Kosakoff's place, like I'm tellin' youse," Bodansky went on hurriedly with an' injured air. "It was late an' he was just puttin' up his shutters, but I flashed me twenty an' he let me in. He was gettin' de bracelet out of de window when de door opens an' in comes a regular swell. He's got his lid pulled down over his eyes an' his coat collar turned up like he's scared of somebody seein' him an' right away I says to myself, 'Dis Kosakoff's a fence, all right, an' dat guy's some high-class crook.'"

"Kosakoff gives him de o-o and shoves de bracelet into my mitt, walkin' quick around de counter but de guy looks up an' I see he's no crook. He don't seem to see me at all but he turns up his nose like de joint was dirt an' old Kosakoff a dog. I'm pretendin' to be lampin' de bracelet, see, but I'm wisin' myself up to de lay-out. Old Kosakoff has got de guy's number all right an' he's tryin' to get him off down de odder end of de store so's I won't pipe what's

goin' on, but I edges along too an' I hears de guy say somet'in' about 't'irty t'ousand' an' I t'inks I'm goin' dippy!

"Old Kosakoff don't turn a hair, dough; he's busy openin' a door at de back of de store when all of a sudden de guy pulls somet'in' out of his coat pocket just as if it was a handful of junk an' I see a flash of green fire dat would knock your lamps out! Kosakoff turned 'round den an' grabbed him by de arm an' hauled him into de back room but I'm still foolin' wit' de bracelet when dey come out. Kosakoff goes to de door wit' him an' says: 'Good night, Mister Crawford. Call again.'

"De guy's no sooner gone den I flings down my twenty iron men an' grabs de bracelet an' beats it. Old Kosakoff tries to stall me, see, but I'm on my way, an' I trails dis guy to—to de house where youse caught me last week."

"How did you know that he lived there?" the inspector asked.

"'Cause he could have made it straight from Thoid to Fift' an' den up, but instead of dat he dodges nort' an' den sout' an' back an' t'rough again, lookin' behind all de time an' I knew de signs; many's de time I dodges de bulls de same way, only he's an amateur, see, an' he don't get on to it dat I'm trailin' him. He hits Fift' at last 'way above his house an' den he t'inks he's clear, an' he beats it home an' opens de door wit' his own key. I spots de number an' de general lay an' chases back to me own hangout. I couldn't figger wheder he'd lifted dem green stones or was just out of dough an' ashamed to have anybody know he was partin' wit' some of his own, but I t'ought dere'd be more where t'irty t'ousand wort' came from. I made up my mind dat I'd work alone an' make a haul dat'd open de lamps of de gang, an' I been watchin' de house off an' on ever since den. De window bein' open dat night last week was just plain luck, for I'd brought me keys wit' me to try on de little side door. Honest t'Gawd, I was workin' alone an' Kosakoff don't know I'm wise to him."

"Oh, can that!" McCarty put in before the inspector could speak. "You didn't quit cold on Kosakoff until you had the goods on him! When did you wise yourself up that he was as big a fence as he is?"

Bodansky hesitated, running the tip of his tongue along his thin, bloodless lips and glancing quickly from one to the other. Then a sly grin broke over his face.

"Youse got me right," he admitted. "No guy dat run a dump like dat, sellin' cheap sparklers an' fixin' broke tickers for a livin' could grab a t'irty t'ousand deal wit'out battin' an eye, an' why would dat swell guy have come dere unless he'd been tipped off? I figgers dat maybe I can get in on Kosakoff's game wit' him when he finds out I'm wise to his real line, but I lays off him quick meself when I dopes out who his pals is. I got plenty sense to know when I'm out of me own class, an' I ain't opened me trap about him, not even to de gang, till now."

"Much you know about who his pals are!" McCarty jeered provocatively. "If we weren't on to his game until just lately how could you wise yourself up?"

"Well, I had a steer, didn't I?" Bodansky retorted. "I'd spotted him an' I laid low an' watched his joint. Dere's a couple of odder fences dat I knows—by sight—an' I lamps 'em goin' to him an' right dere me dogs gets kind of frost-bit for I'm wise dat his dump must be a sort of a clearin' house for de rest an' him de king pin of dat partic'lar bunch, but I didn't know dat he was de main guy of all—de head go-between for Bronheim himself—till I sees Spanish Lou an' Diamond Harry sneakin' in de side door."

A quick glance pregnant with meaning passed between McCarty and his chief. Bronheim had been the most notorious fence on the East Side and long and fruitless had been the efforts of the police department to locate the go-between they knew must exist.

"Bronheim's doing a stretch now up the river!" McCarty asserted.

"Sure, but he gets out in t'ree mont's, an' dey're roundin' up de organization again." Bodansky pulled himself up suddenly. "Say, I don't know dat, I'm just talkin' t'rough me hat! I ain't got not'in' on Kosakoff, at dat. It ain't a crime for a swell guy to go over to de East Side to sell de fam'ly jewels, an' as for Spanish an' Harry, dey might have reformed, an' gone dere peaceable, like I done, to buy some-t'in' for dere goils. I only got cold feet like I told you, an' laid off de whole works. You can't prove not'in' by me!"

"You've gone too far to stop now, Joe!" the inspector said sternly. "You come through with the whole business or we'll put you on the stand against Kosakoff. Who were the other fences you saw going into his place?"

But Joe Bodansky's suddenly aroused suspicion that, in his own parlance, he was being "played for a come-on" had crystallized into certainty with the eagerness of the inspector's attitude and once more he slumped in his chair. A film seemed to glaze his close-set eyes and when he replied it was in the sing-song whine of the habitual crook.

"Ain't I told you I only know 'em by sight? One of de gang—I forgot which—pointed 'em out to me once, but he might have been kiddin' me! As for Harry and Spanish, I never lamped 'em before in me life; I just got a hunch it was dem from seein' deir mugs in de papers when Bronheim was tried. Honest t'Gawd. . . ."

"Send him back, sir," McCarty urged in a rapid undertone to the inspector. "You'll get nothing more out of him this day, and we've got a good lead as it is. I want to get out on the job without losing any time."

Late that afternoon McCarty presented himself once more at the Creveling house and to his request for an interview with Mrs. Creveling the butler brought an affirmative and even cordial response.

"You can go right up, sir. I think Mrs. Creveling was about to send down for your inspector, anyway, for there was a scene this morning between 'er and that Mr. Terhune

that I couldn't 'elp 'earing most of, and what I missed Yvonne, the maid, told us at lunch. She ain't satisfied with 'ow 'e's conducting of the case, to put it mild, sir, and she told Mrs. Waverly as 'ow she was going to find out what progress you was making."

As before, McCarty found Mrs. Creveling in her boudoir but this time she was pacing the floor restlessly and a faint spot of color glowed in either cheek while Mrs. Waverly, curled up on the window seat, watched her with an inscrutable look in her long, feline eyes.

"I am glad you have come, Mr. McCarty." Mrs. Creveling gestured imperiously toward a chair. "You were here yesterday, I understand, but the doctor had counseled absolute rest for me. I cannot rest, I shall not, until I know who killed my husband! Have you come with news for us?"

"News of a kind for *you*, ma'am," McCarty responded with a deprecatory side-glance at the figure in the window. "I'm sorry, but I'll have to see you in private."

"*'Have to'?*" Mrs. Creveling raised her eyebrows. "You can say whatever you wish before Mrs. Waverly."

"I've instructions from headquarters, ma'am." McCarty's tone was respectful, but he shook his head firmly. "What I have to say must be said to you alone, but of course, you're free to use your own discretion afterwards."

Mrs. Waverly had made no move to rise and was listening with a supercilious amusement to the little tilt but Mrs. Creveling's eyes met those of McCarty in sudden question and then she turned to her companion.

"If you don't mind, Stella—? You see we are in the hands of the authorities now—"

"Quite so." Mrs. Waverly laughed and rose. "Send Yvonne for me when the dark secret has been disclosed. I'm going to take a nap."

Without deigning to notice the presence of McCarty she moved to the door and when it had closed behind her Mc-

Carty advanced to the table beside which Mrs. Creveling had halted and drew from his pocket a leather case.

"For one thing, Mrs. Creveling," he said gravely. "I've come to bring you these!"

Before her amazed eyes he opened the case and poured out upon the table a stream of huge, unset emeralds which glowed with a rich but almost sinister vernal light.

"My emeralds!" she gasped. "I read in the papers that Ilsa had given herself up but I did not know that these had been recovered! She had pried them from their settings—?"

"She never touched them, ma'am. She never even saw them." There was a stern note in McCarty's tones. "Ilsa is as innocent of theft as you are yourself."

"Then who—?" Mrs. Creveling's eyes met his and the flash of green fire from the jewels upon the table seemed for an instant reflected in their depths. As though some premonition of the truth came to her she shrank back and sank slowly into the nearest chair. "It must have been Ilsa, and I am determined that she shall be punished! The mere restitution of these jewels is not enough; she must be made an example—"

"The thief who stole them is beyond reach of your punishment, ma'am."

Mrs. Creveling's breath came pantingly.

"How do you know? What have you learned?" she demanded, and then as though afraid to hear his answer she added hurriedly: "But it is absurd! No one else could have taken them, no one could have entered my dressing room during my absence. Mr. Creveling himself testified to that! I had seen them with my own eyes when I closed the case not five minutes before—!"

"'Twas these you saw, ma'am." McCarty produced another case, the replica of the first and opened it, disclosing a necklace and stomacher of antique gold set with small diamonds and large deep-green stones, whose color seemed

dead and flat beside the warm glow of those lying loose upon the table. "They're a good imitation put back in your own old settings, and 'twas done between the time you got the real ones from the vault and the night you meant to wear them."

"Do you mean that they were taken from my husband's safe?" Her voice was a mere whisper.

"Yes, ma'am, and by the only one who knew the combination; the same who entered your dressing room after Ilsa had left it for a minute, and took the fakes after he learned that you meant to have them reset almost at once and knew that you'd find out the truth."

"What do you mean?" she cried. "Are you daring to insinuate—!"

"I'm not insinuating anything, ma'am, but I'll speak plainer if you like," McCarty said grimly. "We've found the man who made the fakes and he can testify that 'twas Mr. Creveling himself who brought the original set to him to have the emeralds prized out and copied. We've got the fence—the receiver of stolen goods—who bought the real stones from Mr. Creveling for twenty thousand dollars, and he can prove who his customer was. Mr. Creveling saw his chance and threw the blame on Ilsa, but he never meant to have her prosecuted for it, I'll say that for him; he only thought to gain time. 'Twas your husband himself who was the thief, Mrs. Creveling!"

CHAPTER XX

MICE AND MEN—AND TRIXIE BURNS

“OF course you’d be pulling off a thing like that when I’m on duty and not with you for the fire works!” Dennis mourned, when later still that afternoon McCarty presented himself at the engine house and reported his recovery of the emeralds. “Whatever put you in mind of that Bodansky again?”

“When I was going over the whole case in my head from the very start I saw a kind of a picture before me of that young crook slinking along to his job and it came over me all of a sudden that ’twas not by accident he picked on the Creveling house. I only wonder I never thought of it before.” McCarty shook his head. “’Twas easy enough to make him talk when I once got him going, and then I took Martin and Yost and trailed up Third Avenue looking for the little jewelry shop of my new friend Kosakoff. We found it all right and him mending watches behind his counter as meek and respectable appearing as the next one! He had a gold pair of spectacles on himself, down on the tip of his nose, and a full set of white whiskers that would do credit to Santa Claus, and not the sharpest dick in the business would have taken him for Bronheim’s right-hand man.

“He made out to be hard of hearing at first and acted the scared, bewildered old innocent to the life, knowing nothing about anything and having his business ruined and his good name took away from him because of some mistake of the hard-hearted police, but he sang a different tune when I opened up on him. I took a chance and told him

that Spanish Lou and Diamond Harry had been run in and were down at headquarters telling all they knew, and then I sprung it that we were looking for those emeralds. He swore by all the little fathers of Russia that he never saw them nor heard of Crawford, but when Martin pulled out the warrant and the bracelets he saw that the game was up and made a grab down behind the counter. Then Yost—"

"And where were you while them two lads were making the pinch?" inquired Dennis.

McCarty grinned.

"I got to him before he reached his gun," he remarked modestly. "I took a glass case with me that was filled with cuff-links and such, and there was a bit of a commotion around the place for a while, but Kosakoff was willing to talk when he woke up after the little nap he decided to take, sudden, when he first hit the floor. Some more of the boys had come over from the station house to keep the crowd back and we got him into the room at the rear of the shop, and made him come across.

"He knows who 'Crawford' was all right, though he won't admit it, nor that he had the least suspicion the emeralds were the same the papers were making such a holler about when the girl was held for trial and jumped her bail. It seems that a swell who gave the name of 'Foster' had sold him a pearl necklace and some other junk and when 'Crawford' came he said 'Foster' had recommended him there. Creveling had only meant to borrow those emeralds from his wife, not steal them, for he arranged with Kosakoff to hold them for three months and agree to sell them back to him for thirty thousand; he must have been in a tight squeeze, for he only got two-thirds of what they were worth, and then dug down for ten thousand for Ilsa's bail when his wife was determined to send her up."

"Well, why wouldn't she be?" Dennis asked. "Did Hill's wife make sheep's eyes at you that you can see only her

side of it? It was tough luck, of course, her being innocent and all, but Mrs. Creveling didn't know that and you can't blame her for wanting the thief punished."

McCarty shook his head.

"I'm not so sure, Denny, that 'twas a matter of principle with her so much as protection. I've got an idea that after she started the rumpus about the robbery and called in the police she got more than a suspicion of the truth, but 'twas too late to back down from the stand she had taken and Ilsa was the goat. Mrs. Creveling is a hard woman, with the hardness that comes only to the proud when something has made them suffer and they don't take it right. There's some that tribulation makes gentle and forbearing and some that it turns to stone and she's the last sort. I'm thinking her husband broke her heart and if it hadn't been for her pride she'd have kicked him out long ago. 'Tis not love for him now that's made her so set on finding his murderer, but other women have been the cause of her suffering and she suspects some woman is at the bottom of his being shot. As long as all this notoriety and scandal have been brought down on her anyway, she's going to find that other woman and make her suffer too, or I miss my guess."

"And she had never a word of regret for all the harm she'd done Ilsa when you told her the truth?"

"Oh, yes." McCarty's lip curled. "It's her own lawyers that'll help quash the indictment, and her own influence through old Alexander that'll smooth out the little matter of bail jumping, and a handsome settlement she'll make on both Hill and Ilsa. I took the satisfaction of warning her that the matter of settlement might be decided by the courts if Ilsa brought action against her and I hinted that the both of them more than suspected the truth. She'll move heaven and earth to keep it from coming out, of course, and I shouldn't wonder if them two was fixed for life."

"'Twas a grand bluff you handed her about finding the man that made the fake emeralds, and that he could prove

Creveling brought the real ones to him!" Dennis remarked. "Where did you get hold of the fakes, anyway?"

"I was not bluffing," McCarty retorted with dignity. "Where do you suppose I've been the day, after seeing Kosakoff off for the station house? I started to hunt up all the makers of imitation junk in town and the fourth one I struck remembered the fine paste emeralds he made and put in the original old settings for a customer named Edward C. Crawford—he did not show much imagination in thinking up an alias for himself, did he? I pulled out a picture of Creveling that I'd cut from the newspaper, but with the name torn off, and he said it was the same man all right. Kosakoff, under pressure, had identified the same picture."

"But the fake emeralds?" persisted Dennis. "You'd think after stealing them away from his wife he would have hid them good until he was able to have them replaced by the real ones."

"He did, Denny, and that's why 'twas easy enough to trace them." McCarty chuckled. "Of course he'd not leave them around the house or try to hide them from Alexander's prying old eyes in one of the office safes, and I didn't size him up as the fellow to trust anybody much, especially in a case like this. He seemed to like the name 'Crawford' since he'd used it twice already, so I got a list of all the little out-of-the-way branch banks and trust companies where they rented safety deposit boxes and started out to look for one that had been hired by Edward C. Crawford a matter of two months ago. Well I knew he wouldn't dare tackle any of the big, prominent places, for Eugene Creveling's face must be pretty well known in banking circles. I sent Martin to Brooklyn and Yost to the Bronx and checked off all the places where Creveling or his father or Alexander had kept accounts, which narrowed the search down a lot. Inspector Druet lent me one of the Department's cars and 'twas well he did, for where do you think

I found what I was after? Over on Staten Island, no less, at a branch of the Tradesman's and Artisan's Bank."

"You've the luck!" declared Dennis. "But who was this guy 'Foster' that Creveling said had recommended him to this Kosakoff? The one that sold a pearl necklace?"

"There's no knowing, but it may turn out to be one of the suckers who got cleaned out at Cutter's poker table and sold some stuff belonging to some woman of his family to cover his losses. I figure out that he must have told Creveling and that put the brilliant idea into his head, for he wasn't the kind to think it up all by himself."

"Well, I'll say you worked quick," commented Dennis. "A matter of twenty-four hours and you've cleared up what the best fellows in the detective bureau haven't been able to do in two months, but you're no nearer yet to the man who killed Crev—!"

"Denny, for the love of the saints, will you put on a new record!" McCarty exclaimed in exasperation. Then he glanced at his watch and chuckled once more. "And put on your regular clothes while you are about it, for 'tis nearly six o'clock and you're going to a party to-night."

"A party, is it?" Dennis eyed him suspiciously. "If 'tis another of Mr. Terhune's little—"

"'Tis not. You're going to a theater this night—a big one on Broadway—to see what they call a musical comedy, and you'll be taking a lady out to supper afterwards; one of the ladies in the show."

"Not if I know it!" retorted Dennis firmly. "Have you taken leave of your senses, Mac, at your time—"

"'Tis a wonder I've not, trailing around with you all these years," interrupted McCarty. "I thought we'd be going on Saturday night but Terhune's little moving picture interfered; 'twas for that I mentioned a dress suit to you, but it's just as well to go as we are, for you'll feel more natural. I've bought the tickets already and left a note to be given to the girl when she reaches the theater."

"What's it you've got up your sleeve, Mac?" demanded Dennis. "What's the name of the show and who is the girl? I know well what you're taking me along for, but I'll never in the world be able to talk to her!"

"If you think it is for conversation I'm inviting you, Denny, I could just as well take a deaf-mute, provided he'd not got rheumatism in his fingers!" McCarty replied with withering scorn. "As for the girl you've had her on your knee many's the time."

"Me?" Dennis turned a scandalized face on his friend. "I'll have you know, Timothy Mc—"

"The show," McCarty put in innocently, "is a fool thing called 'Bye-bye Baby.'"

"I've heard that name somewhere lately, besides seeing it on the bill-boards," Dennis reflected aloud. "Wasn't somebody telling me—? Mac! 'Tis the show Terry Burns's daughter is in, her that threw over Eddy Kirby for a stage career, as I was after telling you the other day! 'Tis little Bea herself we'll be taking out for supper!"

"It is," McCarty admitted briefly.

"But why? Well I know you'll not be taking an evening off in the middle of a case to go gallivanting to the theater nor yet to be seeing the daughter of an old friend. What's she to do with the shooting of that man Creveling?"

"Nothing, you loon!" McCarty exclaimed disgustedly. "Do you mind how we came to be talking of her the other day? I was telling you that some of the girls from that same show were at the party Waverly attended on Thursday night at Sam Vedder's apartment. It come to me that if little Bea wasn't there herself she could introduce us to one that was, and I'd like to find out how Waverly acted that night; whether he was just having a good time without a care in the world or if there seemed to be something on his mind.—'Tis six now, and you're off duty. Hurry up and come on."

But Dennis refused to be hurried and no stage door satel-

lite could have been at more pains with his sartorial appearance. McCarty left him at length to follow at his pleasure and returned to his rooms to add an extra touch or two to his own attire and he was struggling with a new, tight collar when the telephone rang.

"Hello!" he said curtly.

"Are you there, McCarty?" Terhune's voice came to him over the wire. "If you are not busy I wish you would drop in at my rooms this evening. A new phase of the case has occurred to me which I would like to discuss with you."

McCarty gave an exasperated wrench at the collar and flung it on the floor.

"I'm sorry, sir," he replied firmly, "but I've got an engagement for this evening."

"Then break it," advised Terhune coolly. "This is of the greatest importance. I have come to the conclusion after careful study of the situation that the man who killed—!"

Very softly and deliberately McCarty hung up the receiver and rolling up a bit of paper he stuffed it under the bell on the top of the telephone. He was standing with a smile of infinite satisfaction, listening to its persistent but impotent whirl when Dennis appeared at last.

They dined hurriedly at their favorite chop house and reached the theater just as the orchestra was starting the overture. From their seats in the third row Dennis craned his neck around and surveyed the house, taking a professional interest in the arrangement of the exits while McCarty studied the program and snorted.

"A fine kind of a job for Terry's daughter!" he commented. "She must be doing well, though; I see they've given her a lot of parts. She's a villager in the first act and a model and a hunt ball guest—whatever that is!—in the second, and in the third she's 'Babette.'"

"That'll mean she's got a line to speak," Dennis remarked. "If we can't spot her from the rest till then we'll know her

when she opens her mouth, if she's grown up to be like her mother, God rest her soul! You could hear her to the Battery when Terry came home late."

"We'll know her, all right." McCarty smiled slyly, but Dennis had no time to inquire the reason for his certitude, for the curtain ascended and mundane things were lost to him.

"That's her!" McCarty exclaimed after an interval. "Third from your left."

"That tall girl with a bunch of violets on her as big as a platter and hair like brass in the sun?" Dennis sniffed incredulously. "You're dippy, Mac! There was never a blonde in the family."

Nevertheless he watched her assiduously during that act and the one which followed, and when in the third his prediction was verified and Babette fed a line or two to the comedian he sank back in his seat.

"True for you, Mac," he muttered. "She could shoot up like a water tower and bleach out the honest brown hair of her but that's the voice of Moira O'Malley Burns!"

Later he sat in solitary state in the taxicab from which he had refused to budge at the stage entrance to the theater, while McCarty waited at the door and furtively scanned the faces of the girls in plain or elaborate attire as they emerged to hasten off alone up the street or be whirled away in waiting cars, and he thought miserably of the hour before him. How was he ever to talk to this strange, changeling daughter of Terry, the fight promoter?

But when Miss Burns, with the grinning McCarty in tow, appeared at the door of the taxi, she unexpectedly lifted the anticipated burden from his shoulders.

"How de do, Mr. Riordan?" She touched his hand with her gloved fingers and settled with a little whirl into the seat beside him. "It was awfully good of you two old dears to look me up. This is the first night I haven't had a date in a month! And I want to thank you so much for my vio-

lets; I got fined for wearing them in the first act but it was worth it to see old Sylvester's face when she made her entrance! She's the worst cat in the business!"

"Violets?" Dennis turned a suspicious eye on the other "old dear" who was gazing steadily out of the window. "I never—"

Miss Burns was oblivious to the denial.

"We're in for an all-summer run!" she went on. "When Dolly Whitfield leaves to head the Number Two company I'm going to have her part; that's why I changed my hair. You remember that song the tenor sings at her in the second act 'Just a Strand of Your Golden Hair'?—Where are we going for supper?"

In a daze Dennis followed her into the glittering restaurant and listened while she commandeered the services of a waiter captain and ordered as to the manner born. The object of their party had passed completely from his mind until McCarty seized an opportunity when frogs' legs poulette had temporarily dammed the flood of their guest's volubility, to remark:

"It must be grand to be so popular, out at parties every night and all! To think of little Beatrice Burns wasting an evening on two old codgers like us when she might be meeting society swells!"

"I'm 'Trixie' now," the young lady reminded him a trifle sharply. Then her manner softened. "'Beatrice' hasn't got pep enough for Broadway these days. Of course I meet society men all the time, but I'm always glad to see old friends."

"There's a man I know that's seen your show a lot." McCarty felt his way with care. "Sam Vedder's his name and he's in with a lot of society people—"

"Sports, you mean!" Trixie laughed. "We all know Sam! He's crazy about Whitfield but she can't see him. He gave a supper party for her one night last week in his apartment up on the Drive and he certainly knows how to

do things right even if he is only a kind of a con. man, as they say. This was my souvenir."

She exhibited a gold card case attached to the chain of her mesh bag and Dennis glanced swiftly at McCarty, but the latter was examining the trinket admiringly.

"Sam told me about that party and some of the people who were to be there," he observed. "Several of your company—"

"Only the girls. He left it to Whitfield and she asked eight of us. The men were all Sam's friends: Chedsey, the hardware man, and Danton—you know Danton's Flesh Cream?—and Mayer of the Imperial Cloaks and Suits, and Jeffrey Hunt and Roy Goodsell and Fales Ogden and a couple of bookies whose names I don't remember." Trixie paused for breath. "Lots of money and good sports, but Ogden was the only real swell."

Dennis stiffened and McCarty's grip tightened upon his fork.

"Sam said something about a fellow named Waverly," he remarked with studied carelessness. "Maybe he was one of the bookies—?"

Trixie made a little grimace.

"No, he wasn't. Who doesn't know Doug Waverly? Disgusting beast, but he's what you'd call a society swell, all right. It's funny Vedder spoke of him to you; trying to make out he's intimate with people that have got class, I suppose. Waverly goes around with Ogden a lot but he wouldn't trail with a sporting man like Sam."

"Then he wasn't at that party last Thursday night?" McCarty persisted. "Maybe he came after you left."

"Well, he must have come with the milk if he did, for we girls all left together at five in the morning." Trixie stifled a yawn as she picked up her gloves. "I haven't been to bed before dawn in ages, and I've got to cut out the parties soon for a while and get down to study on Whitfield's part."

"I understood from your father that you were going to make a grand career for yourself," Dennis remarked. "You'll never be doing it on two hours' sleep and broiled lobster, Trixie."

"Oh, you're as bad as father!" She tapped him playfully on the cheek and he reddened violently. "It's as much a part of the show business to mix in and get a following as it is to wear your clothes right and sing on the key, and I'm not looking to play 'Juliet,' you know."

They discovered that she had ceased to live at her father's old house uptown but had leased an apartment in the theatrical district with another show girl so the ride homeward was a mercifully short one and she forcibly kissed them both good night with a final admonition to come and see her in the new part.

"If I was Terry, I'd spank her!" Dennis growled as he rubbed his cheek vigorously. "At my time of life to go back to the lads in the engine house with the mark of painted lips on my face!"

McCarty had given fresh instructions to the chauffeur and now he settled back in Trixie's vacant seat.

"You'll not be going back just yet," he announced. "We'll pay a little call first on Mr. Samuel Vedder and find out why he lied to an officer of the law!"

"Mac, I'm thinking you had a hunch that Waverly's alibi was cooked up!" Dennis declared accusingly. "'Twas not to find out how he acted the night that you took that scatter-brained daughter of Terry's out, but to find out if Waverly was there at all."

McCarty smiled grimly.

"Have it your own way, Denny. 'Twas just a lucky shot but it hit the mark. There's an old saying about the best laid plans of mice and men ganging aley, and it's usually a woman that upsets them. Waverly thought he was slick and Vedder played up all right, but one little word from Trixie Burns and that fine little alibi goes up in smoke."

Mr. Samuel Vedder was at home and received them after some protest, in barbarically striped pajamas and an exceedingly bad temper.

"You fellows have got an awful nerve!" he grumbled. "I don't care if you are from police headquarters, you've got nothing on me and this is a hell of a time to rout a man out of his bed! What do you want, anyway?"

"The names of the men who were your guests at that supper party here last Thursday night," McCarty responded shortly.

A change came over the dark, smooth-shaven face of Vedder, but he replied with an assumption of ease:

"I don't know what for; it was a perfectly regular party. Let me see—there was Fales Ogden and Roy Goodsell and Henry Mayer and Douglas Waverly—"

"Stop right there, Mr. Vedder," McCarty interrupted sternly. "Mr. Waverly was not in your rooms last Thursday night. You ought to have coached Chedsey and Danton and the rest of them if you were going to stick to that lie for him."

Vedder shrugged.

"So that's it, is it? They've been talking.—Well, I only tried to do a favor for a friend and it's not my funeral; I wasn't on the stand."

"Come through now, then. What did you lie for when I 'phoned you last Friday morning?"

"Because he asked me to. Douglas is an intimate friend of mine and he called me up and told me he'd been out all night and he thought the wife had put a couple of dicks on him, but he managed to lose them. I'd met him the day before and invited him to the party and he said he had another date, but I suppose that's what made him think of using me for an alibi. He said if any one called up to tell them that he'd been here at a little stag party and I was glad enough to help him out." Vedder paused and regarded them shrewdly. "It's a horse of another color,

though, if headquarters is taking an interest in him.—Say! That's the night his friend was shot—!"

"Oh, nothing like that!" McCarty laughed. "This is a little matter about a private gambling establishment that we've got the goods on. By the way, if you're such a friend of Waverly's you must have sat in more than one game with him; what's his particular hunch, his mascot, his lucky card? He's got one, hasn't he?"

"Sure he has!" Sam Vedder laughed. "He says it has brought a streak of luck down through the family for generations; it's the nine of diamonds!"

CHAPTER XXI

MC CARTY OPENS THE POT

LEAVING the apartment of Samuel Vedder, McCarty parted with the reluctant Dennis and took the taxicab down to the Cosmopolitan Club. For the first time in his career he wanted to pursue his investigation without the companionship and comments of his old friend, and if he felt the satisfaction of achievement and the one-time zest of the chase it was not evident in the stern set of his countenance.

The doorman at the gloomy portals of the exclusive club was most impressive in appearance and disposed at first to be supercilious, but when McCarty disclosed the purpose of his errand and hinted at a social scandal that might spread to the very foundations of the aristocratic institution, if the information which he sought in order to hush the matter up were not forthcoming, the factotum bundled him hurriedly into the coat-room, dismissed the attendant there with a lordly wave of his hand and closed the door.

"What is it you want to know, sir?" he asked with a look of pained resignation. "This is most irregular, and I ought to take you to a member of the house committee, but the quieter we can keep anything of this sort the better. There's not been a scandal connected with the club these twenty years—"

"That's all right; there won't be now if you'll find out what I want to know for me," McCarty assured him. "Do you know Mr. Douglas Waverly?"

"Of course, sir." The man's tone was noncommittal, but his expression spoke volumes.

"Then I suppose I needn't tell you who has decided to find out at last what he is doing when he's not home." McCarty winked deliberately. "Now, we know all right, but it's our business to hand in a report that'll let him out, see? He was here last Thursday afternoon late, wasn't he?"

"I don't know, but I can find out for you." The man looked his contempt for the shady private detective he believed the other to be. "I only come on at eight o'clock. Mr. Waverly may have been here earlier but he came in a little before nine o'clock."

Nine o'clock! So another part of Waverly's alibi was untrue! He had said that he had gone directly from Sharp's Chophouse to see the last act of "The Girl from Paradise," and from there to Vedder's apartment.

"Was Mr. Waverly alone? Did he stay long?" McCarty asked.

"No, sir. He only remained about a quarter of an hour and he was looking for some one." The man spoke with evident hesitation. "It may have been an appointment, but I couldn't say. Mr. Waverly seemed much annoyed, sir."

"Was he in a temper?"

"He was. It isn't proper for us to discuss the members of the club, sir, but a fat man like Mr. Waverly oughtn't to get himself all worked up the way he does. He'll drop dead some day right here and there's bound to be unpleasant comment in the papers. I thought myself that he would have a stroke that night!"

"And who was he looking for?" McCarty saw the man's color change.

"I really don't know, sir. I didn't hear him say—"

"Oh, that's all right." McCarty laughed. "If it was Eugene Creveling, the man who was shot that night, you needn't be afraid to say so. I've got a friend in the homicide bureau down at headquarters, and he says they know all about the quarrel between Mr. Waverly and Mr. Creveling and that it doesn't cut any ice; they know the fellow

that did the shooting and they're going to spring it as soon as they get a little more evidence."

"Yes, it was Mr. Creveling whom Mr. Waverly was looking for, and it was just as well he wasn't here or there would have been a scene," the man admitted confidentially. "Mr. Waverly was purple in the face and the language he used wasn't fit to be heard in the club, but it was quiet here and few of the members were around. A telephone call came for Mr. Waverly, though, and after he'd answered it he calmed down."

"What time was this?"

"Only a minute or so after nine; he couldn't have been here more than ten minutes then."

"Who was the call from?"

"I don't know, sir." The man hesitated once more. "The boy at the switchboard told me about it after, or I wouldn't have known he got a call. He must have sent for his car right away, for in another five minutes it was at the door and he drove off. I haven't seen him since; he hasn't been around the club, at least not in the evening."

"And how did he seem when he drove off? Was he over his fit of temper?"

"Oh, quite. He chuckled when he took the wheel."

"Then he drove himself? Which car did he take out that night?"

"His fast roadster, sir. Yes, Mr. Waverly drove himself and he told the man who brought the car down from the garage that he didn't know when he would send it back; he'd call up if he wanted him to come anywhere for it."

"Didn't one of his own chauffeurs bring the car around, then?"

"No. I think both of them are down at his country place, and Mr. Waverly keeps the car in a public garage when his town house is closed up."

"What garage?" McCarty persisted.

"The Porter-Adams, up on East Eightieth Street."

"What is the number of Mr. Waverly's roadster? Did you ever notice?"

"Of course. I know the numbers of all the members' cars. His is '0479-X. New York.'"

The doorman was evidently growing restless under the interrogation, and McCarty turned as though to take his departure, but halted.

"You say you don't know who that telephone call came from, but the boy at the switchboard would know, wouldn't he? I don't belong to any swell clubs myself, but don't people usually give their names when they call up? Isn't that a rule?"

"It is the custom, sir," the man stammered. "I'll see if the boy knows, but it would be as much as my position here is worth if you told who gave you any information and I've been here a matter of twenty-four years."

"I won't give you away," McCarty promised. "I think we know who the party is but no names will be mentioned."

Reluctantly the man vanished upon his errand and McCarty paced back and forth while he waited. He was making definite progress at last, yet still there was no elation in his manner but rather an odd weariness and doubt. Would the case work out to the end as he had planned or at the last moment would there be some hitch, the occurrence of some untoward incident which might necessitate a fresh start from the very beginning?

When the doorman returned he was shaking his head.

"There was no name given, sir. The boy asked for it, but the party 'phoning said it would not be necessary, that Mr. Waverly expected the call."

"But 'twas a lady, wasn't it?" McCarty eyed him narrowly.

"Yes, sir. It was a lady."

McCarty left the club and turned north on the Avenue until he came to the park when he struck westward. It was close on to three o'clock in the morning and although

he had not closed his eyes on the previous night he felt in no mood for sleep. The evidence which he had collected was purely of a negative nature thus far, but as plainly as though he had himself been present he could now trace in his mind every incident of that fateful Thursday night. But would he be able, when the moment came, to lay his cards upon the table with enough circumstantial evidence to carry conviction? Proof was not to be hoped for since no living being but Creveling himself and one other had been within those walls when the shot was fired and McCarty knew that a confession was not to be thought of, unless . . .

He reached his rooms at last, healthily fatigued after his long walk to find that a note had been thrust under his door. It was from Inspector Druet, and read in part:

“Dear Mac:

“Fine work recovering emeralds, but where have you been? Why don’t you keep me posted on movements? Tried to get you all evening. Think I’m on track at last of man who killed—”

“May the devil and all his relations take him and his ‘tracks’!” cried McCarty aloud and without troubling to read further he tore the note in two and flung it in exasperation into the waste basket. Then he turned out the light and went to bed.

The sun was high when he awakened and after a hasty breakfast at the little nearby restaurant and a glance at the papers he started downtown once more and across to the Porter-Adams garage. He had purposely neglected to shave and the old suit which he had donned was unpressed and shiny as to seams, while the usual derby had been replaced by a shabby cap set at a decidedly rakish angle, which concealed a long strip of perfectly superfluous surgical plaster. He looked every inch a middle-aged mechanic,

hard-working but with "failure" written upon his lugubrious countenance.

The garage proved to be a large one and from the costly types of the cars which filled every available foot of space it was evident that it catered to an exclusive class of private trade. A man in overalls with an oil-rag in his hand slouched in the entrance-way and glanced up half surlily as McCarty halted before him.

"Does a guy named Waverly keep his car here?" the latter asked without preamble.

The man spat and wiped a grimy hand across his mouth before he responded:

"What's it to you if he does?"

"It's a lot to me!" McCarty seconded the truculent tone of the other. "I've been looking for him ever since I got out of the hospital."

"What's the matter?" The man straightened with a show of interest and eyed the thick-set figure before him appraisingly. "Had a run-in with him? You'd ought to have been able to knock him out all right; he's all flabby fat."

His tone was contemptuous and McCarty retorted:

"I've had no chance at him yet, but wait till I get hold of him, that's all! A fellow standing by when he ran into me told me his number while I was waiting for the ambulance. It's '0479-X New York,' isn't it? And his car is a long, low roadster with an engine built like a racer?"

The other nodded.

"You got a straight tip; there's the car over there now." He pointed toward the farther side of the garage. "How did it happen?"

"So that's it, is it? That's the road-louse that busted my taxicab?" McCarty doubled one fist significantly. "And the rotter that was behind the wheel driving off like the devil and leaving me for dead for all he knew, or cared! I'm going to have the law on him good and proper but I'll

take a little of it out on his hide first! A decent, hard-working man ain't got a chance to make a living these days with guys like him hogging the road and riding over him."

"That's right!" the other agreed. "Was it your own cab?"

"Sure." McCarty was succeeding in working himself up into a well-simulated state of ire. "I just got it paid off two weeks ago and I've been too busy to look after the insurance."

"Tough luck!" The man spat again. "It ain't a complete wreck, is it? You can get it patched up?"

"'Wreck'?" McCarty snorted. "I'm lucky if I don't lose my license for leaving a heap of junk obstructing the road! Who is this guy Waverly, anyway? I've just come from the license bureau where I went to look up his number."

"Oh, he's one of the big stiffes from the Avenue." The man gestured toward the park. "Got a bunch of dough but he's a tight-wad; hope you sting him good! He's more trouble than anybody else who leaves their cars here; always kicking, and bullying, and flying into a rage over nothing, and getting his damned little bus out all hours, but the tips he hands out in a month wouldn't buy you a square meal! He's the kind, all right, that would side-swipe you from behind and ride off and give you the laugh!"

"That's just what he did to me, but I'm laughing now!" McCarty said grimly. "It ain't only my cab he'll pay for, but my twelve-dollar fare that I had rung up, to say nothing of my bu'sted head and shoulder and the loss of my time! —Look here!"

He lifted the cap for an instant displaying the long strip of plaster and the other grunted sympathetically.

"Make him dig down deep; it'll serve him right! Say, what happened to your fare? Was the party hurt too?"

"No, only shook up bad. He hired me to take him out to his home in Greenwich and I didn't get the location of his house or I'd know where to find him for a witness. He

said he'd direct me when we got into the burg." McCarty lied glibly. "He skipped before I came to."

"Say! When did this happen?" the man demanded suddenly.

"Last Thursday night, nearer Friday morning. Four days have I laid on the flat of my back in the hospital—"

"Thursday night!" the other repeated. "That accounts for it!"

"Accounts for what?" McCarty felt at last the old thrill of exultation. Was his long-drawn-out histrionic effort to be rewarded?

"Why, the bent mud-guard and the twisted axle and the blood on him!" the man explained. "I worked all Thursday night, taking the place of one of the other fellows that had been hurt when a car was backed in. Waverly sent for his little bus about nine o'clock from one of his clubs, and it was after four in the morning when he drove it in. He usually sends for some one to go and get it but this time he brought it himself and he was in one hell of a temper, swearing because some other guy had left his car in the way and yelling at me till he was purple in the face! That little bus of his is a good machine all right and powerful for her size, but she come limping in like a dog that had been kicked, and I see she was all battered up on one side. Waverly wasn't in no state to be asked questions, though, and he didn't say anything about an accident. He had on a big yellow leather motor coat and I saw there was blood on it."

"Was he hurt, too?" McCarty added with as vicious a snarl as he could muster. "I hope to the Lord he was!"

"No. I was putting the car up and he was standing 'round under the lamp when I first got a good flash at him. He looked mad and kinder scared, too, and the blood—there wasn't much of it—was smudged on the chest and sleeves of the coat. He caught me staring and looked down at himself and that was the first he knew of it, I guess, for

he got out of the light quick and started cursing again. He waited, though, until I had finished with the car and then gave me directions about having it fixed first thing in the morning. Handed me a dollar, too; first time I've seen more'n a quarter from him at one time!"

"I'm glad he had *some* damage, anyway, and I'm going to damage him a whole lot more before I'm through with him!" McCarty declared. "I guess it's no use hanging around here any longer; he'll probably send for his car if he wants it and not come for it himself. I've got his address from the license bureau; think I'd catch him in now?"

"Don't know." The man turned as a voice from the depths of the garage hailed him. "He ain't got any regular hours that I know of, but I wish you luck; he's sure some bad actor! So long."

Taking leave of his informant, McCarty returned to his rooms and, shaving, dressed himself in his usual immaculate attire. Then he went to the telephone and called up Mr. John Cavanaugh O'Rourke.

"It's just to remind you of your promise, sir, and to ask a favor of you."

"Sure, Timmie, anything for old times' sake!" came the cheery response.

"'For old times' sake!'" McCarty repeated softly as though to himself. Then he raised his voice. "'Tis for that I ventured to ask it of you, sir. For that, and to keep any notoriety about the entertainments of your friend down near Washington Square from getting in the papers and my—my associates downtown from starting anything."

"I've got you," O'Rourke said quickly. "What do you want me to do?"

"Well, sir, they've got wind of certain things—my associates, I mean—but I've got a kind of a drag myself down there and I know I can square things so that nobody'll be interfered with or even questioned." McCarty spoke with jaunty assurance, but a deep flush mantled his honest

countenance as though he were heartily ashamed of himself for the rôle he was playing. "I told you I've no wish to stop people from enjoying themselves in their own way, especially when it's my way, too, now and then, and that was on the level, but this is on your account, too, sir. Will you go to see the gentleman down near the Square and tell him that the only way he can keep from an awkward investigation which would displease his friends as well as himself, is to give a little party to-night and let me pick the guests?"

"I'll do it, Timmie. Say, it would be deucedly rotten if anything comes out—!" There was an unaccustomed note of worry in the other's buoyant tones and McCarty hastened to reassure him.

"Nothing will, sir, if Mr.—your friend—will do as I say. I'll be bringing three men friends with me, and be sure you're there yourself, sir, but not—not the Lady Peggy."

"Look here, Timmie!" There was a hushed note in O'Rourke's voice now. "What's the game?"

"Just the usual one, sir. Be sure you tell your friend that. The usual game in every way—all members of the club. You understand?"

"I do, yes; but whether I can make Cutter see it—?"

"He must, sir, unless he wants to take a little trip downtown, for they've got the goods all right and you know you said yourself that things were different here to what they are in the old country. There's no discrimination used between the amusement of gentlemen and the profession of blackguards. Tell him it wouldn't do any good for him to—well, to go out automobiling, we'll say. He's got new neighbors that are interested in his house, and his car might break down before it had got far. I can't speak any plainer."

"I understand!"

"He's not to be surprised that one of my friends that I

bring will be Inspector Druet; he's the fellow that'll hush everything up for us. There's just one thing more; your friend must get hold of Mr. Douglas Waverly and see that he'll be there without fail. He's apt to be in a bad humor to-day, but no matter of that. He must be made to understand that it's just a sociable little party and me and my friends are fixed proper and there to give protection as well as wanting to horn in; we don't want any trouble, so give him the quiet tip that it'd be well for all concerned if he sits in real cordial, just as though we were in the same class with him."

"All right, Timmie, I'll do my best for you. I'll call you up later and let you know what luck I have," O'Rourke replied. "Where and when can I get you?"

"At half-past six at my own rooms, sir. I would not ask it of you but 'tis to avoid trouble for all your friends."

McCarty listened with a still flaming face to the other's slightly incoherent expression of gratitude and then hung up the receiver. For a moment he paused undecidedly. Dennis, he knew, would be waiting eagerly for his appearance at the engine house to learn what new developments had arisen, but he did not want to take him into his confidence just yet; Denny was loyal but his histrionic ability was not great, and by his expression alone he would betray to the most casual observer the plan which was afoot.

Just before noon McCarty dropped in at the office of the *Bulletin* and found a letter awaiting him. An hour later when he presented himself at Mrs. Baillie Kip's house, he bore a somewhat bulky package wrapped in brown paper and the habitual twinkle in his blue eyes had hardened into a steely, purposeful light.

"Really, I cannot understand why you people keep hounding me!" Mrs. Kip swept into the room and regarded him with a look in which indignation and appeal were skillfully blended. "It is odious, but I suppose it is because I am a woman alone in the world that you dare to persecute me! I

don't know why I have been singled out of all the Crevelings' friends, except because Mrs. Creveling has developed an inexplicable animosity towards me!"

"Has she, ma'am?" McCarty asked mildly.

Mrs. Kip shrugged.

"I have called twice and she refused to see me," she admitted. "She will not even talk to me over the telephone, and Mrs. Waverly's tone is positively insolent! I can only think that some one must have poisoned Mrs. Creveling's mind against me, but one would not imagine that she would stoop to be catty at a time like this."

"Maybe she's been hearing a few things about fans and Chinese cabinets," McCarty suggested blandly.

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Kip retreated a step and a rich color dyed her face.

"Only that now her husband's gone it was probably just as easy for Mrs. Creveling to get a line on things she hadn't known before, as it was for us to do the same thing, Mrs. Kip!" There was a stern note in his voice. "'Tis nothing to us, of course, since it has no bearing on the actual murder, but neither has the errand that brought me here the day. There's enough dirt and scandal in this case as it is without dragging in more that don't concern it and people that have been only foolish. That's why I came to you quietly to return something you lost."

He held out the bundle and Mrs. Kip took it from him in silence with averted eyes. She had winced at his brutally frank mention of "dirt and scandal" and her poise seemed shaken, but her face was an expressionless mask as she unwrapped the paper.

The next instant she shrank back as though from a blow as a scarf of rich, lustrous fur fell at her feet, and raised suddenly terrified eyes to his.

"What is it?" she cried hysterically. "That is not mine, I never saw it before! I have lost nothing! Why have you brought that here to me?"

"Because it is a part of the duty of our organization to restore lost property, ma'am." McCarty watched her face steadily. "If you've forgotten you lost that fur neck piece and where, there are plenty of people who can identify it as yours and one who knows where it was found and who else was there. It's no use, Mrs. Kip; we've got the goods straight."

She wavered and caught at a chair back. Her lips moved but for a moment no sound came. Then she asked in a hoarse whisper:

"What are you going to do?"

"That depends entirely on you, ma'am."

"Oh, what do you mean?" she cried quickly. "You have your price, of course! I forgot that!—Tell me your terms, I will do anything, pay you all you—"

"You can't pay me anything, ma'am!" McCarty interrupted. "If you'll do what I tell you there'll be no word said of that scarf unless you open your own lips, and I don't think you'll do that. If you go your own way, of course, we'll have to go ours."

"Oh, I'll do anything, *anything!*" Her hands were working convulsively together. "Only tell me what you want me to do!"

"Stay in your house, ma'am, for the rest of the day. Don't write any notes or talk to a soul on the 'phone or see anybody who calls. I'll come for you early this evening and I want you to be ready to go out with me and some friends of mine. You needn't be alarmed, there'll be friends of yours there, too, and you'll not be detained more than an hour."

A little color had come once again into her blanched face and now she raised her head with a little of the old spirit.

"Mrs. Waverly and Mrs. Creveling? Will they be present? I don't know anything about Mr. Creveling's death, I refuse to speak of it—!"

"You'll not be asked to, ma'am. You'll just be yourself

and look on, and if you speak of anything it'll be of your own will. Of course you are free to accept my terms or not as you please—?"

"I'll accept!" she laughed hysterically. "I know when I'm beaten, and you hold the cards! After all, it's every one for themselves, isn't it? I'll be ready for you, Mr. McCarty, when you come."

Dennis Riordan was almost ill with suspense when just as he was going off duty that evening he was called to the telephone.

"'Tis me, Denny." McCarty's voice came to him over the wire. "Hotfoot it around here to my rooms as soon as you're dressed, for I'm taking you out in society to-night for a quiet little game."

"I'll have none of it!" Dennis declared. "The last time I sat in one with you I lost everything but the immortal soul of me! Where have you been this day?"

"I've been stacking the cards, Denny." There was a grimly portentous note in his tones. "I'm ready now when my deal comes to open the pot, but the Lord only knows what will come with the turn of the card!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE TURN OF A CARD

“WE’RE in for it now, but I don’t mind telling you, Jack, that I think this is damned bad business!” Nicholas Cutter eyed his guest moodily across the dinner table. “It is infamous of the authorities to attempt to interfere with a man’s amusement in his own home among friends! I tell you things are coming to a rotten state in this country! How do you know that this outrageous demand of the McCarty fellow isn’t just a trick to catch us in the act?”

“Because I know him,” John Cavanaugh O’Rourke declared stoutly. “He’s a friend of mine from my boyhood days and he wouldn’t do anything to hurt me or my wife, you can rely on that.”

“A gambling scandal wouldn’t affect you so much, my boy; you’d be merely one of the players, but you forget that these games have been taking place in my house and I’ve been the banker. It would mean ostracism, ruin to me to be hauled up in court like the keeper of a common gambling house!”

“Timmie knows that, and he is protecting you because you are a friend of mine,” O’Rourke replied.

“But how about Doug Waverly? Why was that detective chap so anxious to have him here? I tell you it doesn’t look good to me!”

“I don’t know.” A little thoughtful frown gathered on O’Rourke’s forehead, but he added loyally: “Whatever his motive is, Nick, you can be sure it is only to avoid trouble for us. I wish I could be as sure of all my friends as I am of Timmie!”

"Oh, you Irish!" Cutter smiled, then he asked quickly: "But what did you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing; forget it." O'Rourke shrugged. "I was just thinking of 'Gene Creveling, that's all. He was pretty sure of his friends, wasn't he, and yet some man broke bread with him and then shot him down in cold blood."

Cutter shuddered fastidiously and pushed back his chair.

"By Jove, you're in a cheerful mood!" he exclaimed. "I've been trying to get poor old 'Gene out of my mind all day. If he didn't kill himself, it is my opinion that we'll never know who did and there's no use being morbid about it. He has cashed in, but the game is still going on and we've got to play.—Come into the music room; I've had the piano restrung and I want you to hear the tone."

They passed from the dim, cloistered beauty of the high-ceilinged Jacobean dining-room into a larger, more lofty apartment, its walls a tracery of rich carvings that had been brought panel by panel from a Florentine palace, its chandeliers a glory of glittering crystals which were reflected in the sheen of the mosaic floor. Upon a raised platform at the farther end of the room were grouped a score or more of musical instruments of all ages, from an ancient lyre to the most modern masterpiece of the piano makers' art, and nearly all possessed histories which had made them coveted by museums the world over.

With an impatient gesture Cutter switched off all the lights save that which glowed from a single low lantern behind the piano and advanced to the platform, while O'Rourke dropped into a chair at its foot and gave himself up in a dreamy ecstasy to the wondrous tones which welled out beneath the master touch of his extraordinarily gifted host.

He came to himself with a start when Cutter stopped abruptly and whirled around upon the stool, exclaiming while still the notes of the final chord pulsed upon the air:

"Damn it, this McCarty has something up his sleeve! Why should he practically blackmail me into receiving him

and his confounded friends to-night? If he is going to use his influence to keep us out of any mess on your account, as you are so confident he will, why doesn't he do it and not force himself on us? I don't like it, and no more does Doug. Have you seen him?"

O'Rourke nodded.

"He's like a bear with a sore head. Somebody has been poking a nose into his private affairs and I've never seen him in such a rage. I had my work cut out for me to make him realize that it was to the interest of all of us to be diplomatic to-night and extend a glad hand to our friends of the police department. He promised finally that he would come."

"Who are the other two McCarty is bringing beside Inspector Druet?" asked Cutter. "It wouldn't surprise me to see the District Attorney and the head of the Vice Committee—"

"Oh, nothing like that!" O'Rourke laughed. "He didn't say, but I think we can safely leave the personnel of the party to his discretion.—There they are now, or Waverly!"

The muffled thud of the knocker had come faintly to their ears through the opened door and Cutter rose without a word and led the way toward the back of the house, to the glass-enclosed extension which jutted out into the yard.

No flowers bloomed here, but the rarest and most beautiful of all the objects of art with which Cutter had surrounded himself were grouped in this exquisite room like a collection of perfect jewels in a fitting casket. The rich, somber hall through which they passed served but as a background for the fairy-like brilliance which greeted them on the threshold. Myriads of soft lights shone upon world-famed paintings and were reflected in the long mirrors, gleaming back in a thousand flashing facets from the crystal and gold of the superb supper service spread out upon the long sideboard; fauteuils and cabinets of marvelous workmanship lined the walls, in strange contrast to the

plain mahogany table covered with green baize and the equally severe chairs that surrounded it which occupied the center of the room and which seemed by their mere incongruity to focus the attention.

The apartment was a familiar one to O'Rourke and he stood a little to one side conversing with his host in a low tone as the old man-servant threw open the doors and admitted the visitors.

"This is a pleasure, Mr. McCarty, I assure you." Cutter advanced to the foremost of the arrivals and held out his hand. "If you had told me when you called the other day that you were a devotee of our national indoor game I would have gladly extended an invitation to you to join us any time. We play quite frequently, you know."

McCarty's eyes twinkled with amusement at the audacity of his host, but he turned with grave dignity to present his companions.

"This is Inspector Druet, Mr. Cutter, and an old friend of mine, Dennis Riordan, who is not connected with the Force. Mr. Terhune I'm thinking you know."

"We have met," Mr. Cutter acknowledged somewhat wryly as he shook hands. "I am glad to welcome you, gentlemen; you know Mr. O'Rourke, I think."

McCarty drew the latter gentleman aside under cover of the general conversation which immediately followed and asked:

"Where is Mr. Waverly?"

"He promised to be here, and I expect him any minute." O'Rourke looked at the other quizzically. "Say, do you know anything about what made him so angry to-day?"

"Was he upset like?" McCarty grinned.

"I thought he'd have a fit! You warned me over the 'phone that he would be in a bad humor, you know, and I thought you must be at the bottom of it. I don't mind telling you, Timmie, that Cutter doesn't half like the idea of this little party to-night; he is afraid you are up to some

trick, but I assured him that you wouldn't try anything of that sort on a friend of mine."

There was a rising inflection in his tone as though he were asking a question and McCarty responded to it gravely.

"It is a trick, in a way, sir, and I'm bound to admit it, but it has nothing to do with the games that's been going on here. 'Tis a more serious matter, entirely, and this was the only way to come at the truth."

"'A more serious matter'?" O'Rourke repeated. "Good God, you don't mean anything to do with Creveling's death?"

McCarty nodded slowly.

"I'm telling you this in strict confidence, sir, not only because it's your due since you helped us arrange this little party, but because I want you to sit tight and say or do nothing no matter what is said or done that you might take exception to. You'll realize that we've a purpose behind it all and wait till we can explain more fully." He paused and added in a still lower but most impressive tone: "You see, we know who killed Mr. Creveling, but we don't know *why*. Waverly does, and it's the last link we need in the chain against the guilty person. We've got to get the truth out of him even if it takes a hell of a scare to make him come across. You understand?"

"Yes, I think I do, Timmie, but was it necessary to drag us all in?" There was infinite reproach and chagrin in O'Rourke's tones.

"'Tis to keep you all out of anything further that I've asked you all to be here to-night," McCarty responded. "Waverly'll get the scare here, but he'll do his explaining afterwards, in private, and it'll let the rest out that's here. I'm keeping my promise to you and doing whatever's in my power to prevent trouble from coming to all of you."

"'Evening, everybody. Have I kept the game waiting?"

They all turned with one accord to the door, to find Douglas Waverly standing on the threshold. He appeared composed and tried to smile, but a faint, mottled flush was

visible upon his flabby countenance and the veins on his forehead stood out like whipcords. Nodding with cool assurance to McCarty he acknowledged the introduction to the others civilly enough and turned to the baize-covered table where Cutter had already seated himself and was busily engaged in stacking up the ivory chips.

The latter looked up with a smile of welcome which quickly changed to a look of concern.

"Hello, Doug! Anything the matter? You look a little seedy. You're not ill, are you?"

Waverly shook his head but one pudgy hand went to the left breast of his shirt front.

"Just a touch of the old trouble, but it's been giving me some rotten twinges to-day," he admitted. "I'll be all right, of course; I've been running the old engine too long on high, I expect.—What's the limit to-night? We'll have to pike, I suppose."

"Sit beside me, sir, on my left," McCarty said in a hurried undertone to O'Rourke as they all moved toward the table.

The latter glanced at him in surprise, but obeyed without comment, his eyes wandering to the others as they took their places. Dennis Riordan marched to the chair at his other side, next to that of Cutter, while Terhune in turn seated himself on Cutter's left and Inspector Druet on McCarty's right, leaving the only vacant chair between himself and the criminologist. Waverly looked about him, shrugged and, pulling out the chair, dropped into it. As he did so his face twitched for an instant and his hand went again to his heart.

"Ten-dollar limit, gentlemen." Cutter raised his eyes. "Is that agreeable?"

Dennis shot an agonized glance at McCarty, but met with an answering one which made him quail and add a hurried assent to those of the rest. The game began. It went slowly at first, O'Rourke taking the first jack-pot on three

queens, with two of which he had opened. McCarty eyed Waverly curiously as the latter fumbled clumsily with the cards in dealing; the fat man was breathing heavily and his voice had seemed thicker than on their first meeting. Had he fortified himself for the evening by an over-indulgent incursion into his private stock, or was he laboring still under the agitation of which O'Rourke had spoken?

As he laid down the pack to take up his hand the door behind them opened once more and a high-pitched ripple of laughter came to their ears with a little hysterical note running through it.

"That stupid Gregory tried to keep me out, Nickie—Oh!" Mrs. Baillie Kip, in an evening gown which displayed her full-blown form to perfection, paused in seeming confusion on the threshold.

"Mrs. Kip!" Cutter left his place as the others rose and advanced quickly toward her. "This is an unexpected pleasure! I—we—you see—!"

"Tell him to let her stay!" McCarty whispered in a hasty aside to O'Rourke, and passing Cutter bowed before her.

"Good evening, Mrs. Kip. You've not forgotten me?"

"Mr. McCarty." She laid an icy hand in his for a moment. "I had no idea that you were a friend of Mr. Cutter's, nor that I was intruding upon a stag affair. I understood that Mrs. Waverly would be here this evening and I fancied that some of the other ladies were coming."

"Won't you stay, anyway?" Cutter drew away from O'Rourke and flashed a strange glance at McCarty, who returned it with an almost imperceptible nod. "This is quite an impromptu affair or we should have telephoned to you and Mrs. O'Rourke and the rest, but it really doesn't matter. Choose one of us to chaperone you, and join us, do."

"We-ell." Mrs. Kip flushed and dropped her eyes. "I wouldn't think of intruding in the game, but if you are quite sure I shall not be in the way, I might be persuaded

to look on for a little while. I know it is horribly unconventional but I was bored to tears at home."

She came slowly forward and Cutter presented Terhune, the inspector and Dennis Riordan in turn. McCarty observed that after greeting the criminologist her eyes passed swiftly to those of the inspector as though seeming not to see the man who stood between and she turned with unmistakable relief to bow to Dennis, who was gaping at her in fatuous admiration.

O'Rourke, at a gesture from McCarty, had drawn a chair up behind his own and to the right of that of the fireman, and he patted it invitingly.

"Come and give me luck, Mrs. Kip," he begged. "I won the first pot but that was because you were already almost here, I am convinced of it!"

Mrs. Kip smiled in acquiescence and made a laughing rejoinder, but she seated herself with obvious reluctance, for she was directly across the table from Waverly and could no longer attempt to avoid the gaze he bent upon her. It was a curious mingling of warning and questioning and before it her color ebbed but she held her head high.

The rest seated themselves and the game was resumed. All passed until Dennis was reached when that individual suddenly became galvanized into life and opened for three dollars. Cutter stayed, and Inspector Druet and O'Rourke, but the rest dropped and McCarty sat back in his chair, studying the faces about the table.

O'Rourke seemed intent upon his cards, Mrs. Kip was looking down at her tightly locked fingers, Dennis was pre-occupied and Cutter inscrutable; Terhune, too, leaned back with a detached, slightly bored air, Waverly chewed sullenly upon his unlighted cigar and Inspector Druet moved restlessly in his chair while over all of them a nameless suspense brooded, a tensivity as of relentless bands tightening about them.

It was slightly leavened when Dennis with naïve glee raked

in the pot on a bluff and proudly displayed his opening pair of aces.

"Gad, I'm thirsty!" Waverly ran a fat finger around his collar as though it were choking him. "Tell Gregory to get some water, will you, old man?"

The man-servant was at his elbow in an instant with a slender crystal carafe and glass upon a mirror-lined tray, and the inspector made room for it between them as he picked up the cards to deal. Waverly drank deep and cleared his throat, but his voice seemed thicker than ever as he addressed a remark to their host.

McCarty looked down at the cards in Inspector Druet's hands.

"Odd design, aren't they?" Cutter had followed his gaze from across the table. "They were made especially for me in Austria some years ago, and I laid in a good supply. I must have a hundred or more fresh packs identical to them lying around the house."

"I've never seen any just like them." McCarty studied the grotesque pattern picked out in green and purple and gold upon the backs of those he held in his hand, and then raised his eyes to Cutter's. "They must have cost a lot of money?"

"I've forgotten. I believe I paid around twenty-five dollars a pack for them," the other responded absently. "You couldn't get them now at any price, of course."

"Think of that now!" marveled McCarty. "I lost a hundred and sixty-five dollars one night on a trip from Kansas City to Milwaukee and the deck I played with only cost fifty cents."

"If you're opening, Mac, say the word!" Dennis admonished, emboldened by his recent coup. "You're holding up the game."

Waverly's chair creaked, Mrs. Kip dropped her gloves and retrieved them quickly before O'Rourke could stoop for them and even Cutter stirred in his seat. The tensi-

which for a moment had lightened descended again with almost tangible force and the hand was played out in a strained silence broken only by the monosyllabic utterances of the bettors.

Waverly won with a full house but his only comment was a grunt. The mottled flush had deepened on his face and a pulse throbbed perceptibly in his temple.

It was McCarty's deal and as he picked up the cards Dennis drew a deep, convulsive breath as one about to plunge into cold water and started a lengthy post mortem about his last hand which strangely enough seemed suddenly to interest Terhune and the inspector, also. They promptly took issue with him and as the discussion waxed one of McCarty's hands stole in a lightning movement to his pocket and back to the deck of cards which he held just at the edge of the table.

He proffered them to Inspector Druet, who cut gravely, and as he started to deal the argument died down as swiftly as it had arisen. Mrs. Kip stiffened suddenly and Terhune, glancing across at her, followed her gaze to the man at his side. Waverly's head had fallen forward on his thick neck and his chin lay in folds over his collar.

"Your cards, Mr. Waverly." Terhune touched his arm.

"Pardon," Waverly mumbled, jerking his head back. "Confoundedly hot in here! Cutter, old man, you needn't be afraid of a ray of light or a breath of air now; we have the majesty of the law on our side!"

He grinned lopsidedly up at Inspector Druet as McCarty picked up his hand and scrutinized it. He held the seven, eight, nine and ten of clubs and the eight of hearts.

"Who opens?"

"I'm by." O'Rourke regarded his hand critically and Dennis reluctantly threw down his cards.

"I'll open it." Cutter pushed three chips into the center of the table. "Anybody with me?"

"I will—er—trail." Terhune followed suit.

"Same here." Waverly drew a stertorous breath.

"Nothing stirring." Inspector Druet relinquished his hand and sat back.

"Raise you five, Mr. Cutter," McCarty remarked.

"I know when I've had enough." O'Rourke dropped his cards upon the table.

"Little action at last, eh?" Cutter smiled and shoved ten chips forward. "Right back at you, Mr. McCarty!"

"I will drop," said Terhune. "The psychology of success in cards as in all things—"

"I'm staying right with—you—both," Waverly breathed rapidly. "Only we—three—in it?"

McCarty nodded.

"How many cards?" he asked.

Before Cutter could reply Waverly's head fell forward again and his great body seemed to slump in his chair. He had thrown one card aside and the pudgy hand holding the remaining four dropped inertly on the table.

"Not any, thanks; I'll play these." Cutter spoke with cold annoyance and his eyes turned once more to Waverly, who, he was now convinced, had been indulging too copiously in stimulants, just as the latter crumpled forward in his chair and his head with the flabby, twisted face turned sidewise toward the Inspector and McCarty, and rested upon the table.

For an instant they all sat spellbound and McCarty darted a swift, keen glance at the strangely relaxed form and the unclouded surface of the mirror-lined tray which those gross, half-parted lips all but touched.

No breath issued from them! McCarty held his own as the startling fact surged through his consciousness, and watched the surface of the tray with straining eyes. It remained undimmed, and there was no slightest stir of that bulky mound of inert flesh!

Great God in Heaven! A reverential awe went up with that silent cry from McCarty's heart and a pæan of thank-

fulness and swift-rising exultation. That which but a moment before had been a man was now but a *thing*, an inanimate substance incapable forever more of betrayal, for out of his body with the passing of life had gone the secret which would always have imperiled McCarty's plan! It had not been accident, not the normal result of his own evil passions and dissipation which had stilled the heart in that gross body, but the hand of God Himself that had been laid upon it, and miraculously the way lay clear before McCarty to a solution of which he had not even dreamed.

Alive, Waverly had been a menace but dead he was priceless! The others did not yet realize the situation and McCarty gathered his forces for the greatest coup of his career.

"One card, Mr. Waverly!" he cried and at the ringing quality of his tone an electrified start ran around the table. "There is your card, your lucky card, but you lose with it now! It is stained with the blood of the man you killed! I arrest you, in the name of the law, for the murder of Eugene Creveling!"

As he thundered the accusation to dead ears, to clay, he had slipped quickly from the bottom of the deck the nine of diamonds which, torn and blood-stained, he had found beneath the strip of tapestry on the table beside the body of Creveling and now he flung it down before that which had been Douglas Waverly.

A moment of silence followed his denunciation and then a stifled shriek from Mrs. Kip broke the hideous tension and O'Rourke leaped to his feet.

"Waverly!" he cried. "For God's sake, Waverly!"

"So that was the game, the real game!" Cutter kicked his chair aside. "Doug, do you hear this maniac? Sit up and answer him, or by Heaven—!"

"Wait!" Terhune had bent forward even as Inspector Druet placed his hands upon the shoulders of that inert figure, and together they raised it once more to an erect position. The head fell back, revealing a face suffused

with purplish blue, the close-set eyes half-open and glazing in a fixed stare, the chin dropped hideously. Mrs. Kip shrieked again and covered her own eyes, and Terhune exclaimed:

"The man is dead!"

The others crowded about and Inspector Druet pressed his ear for a moment against the wide expanse of shirt bosom. When he raised his head they read confirmation in his eyes even before he spoke.

"Mr. Terhune is right," he said solemnly. "We were just a little too late!"

Mrs. Kip dropped her hands and her eyes, dark and wide, gazed straight into those of McCarty. The next moment she fell back limply in her chair.

"I've just one thing to say to you gentlemen, and a decision I'm going, with the permission of the inspector, to leave to you." McCarty stood on the hearth-rug in the sumptuous library where he had been received on his first visit to the house and surveyed Cutter and O'Rourke, who, with Terhune, Inspector Druet and the still dazed Dennis, were grouped before him.

It was an hour later. Mrs. Kip, hysterical and fainting, had been sent to her home in the capable care of Cutter's buxom housekeeper, and back in that dark, silent room where the last game had been played to a tragic finish an immovable figure lay stretched upon a fauteuil beneath a pagan prayer rug.

"A decision?" Cutter raised his eyebrows. "It looks very much as though you had taken things into your own hands. Waverly was my friend. He's gone and he cannot answer your charges, but in his place I should like to know what grounds you have for them. That, at least, you owe me since you chose to stage your farce in my house!"

"It was hardly straight cricket, you know, Timmie!" O'Rourke spoke in a shocked, strained tone. "I don't be-

lieve, though, that you're the sort of man to make an accusation like that unless you thought you could substantiate it."

"Thank you, sir." McCarty shot a grateful glance at him and then squared his broad shoulders. "We can prove that Douglas Waverly had a quarrel with Eugene Creveling in that gentleman's own house at a late little supper about a fortnight ago, and we have a witness who listened to it. The two of them are dead now, but you both know them of old; do I need to say what that quarrel was about in a general way, though no names were mentioned? Waverly threatened Creveling then and they've not spoken to each other since. If you'll look back, you'll both recall what happened in this very house a week ago to-night; how Creveling threw down his cards and left the game when Waverly came. Can either of you remember one occasion when they have talked friendly together in the last fortnight?"

There was silence while Cutter and O'Rourke looked at each other and then McCarty resumed:

"I can go back further than that if it's necessary; I can show you the root of that quarrel months ago, and the jealousy and all that branched out of it, but 'tis best buried with the two of them. Last Thursday something happened between them that brought things to a crisis. We'll never know what it was, perhaps, but we can guess. Creveling invited Waverly to come to his house that night and have it out and Waverly accepted."

"But look here!" O'Rourke interrupted. "Creveling went down to Broadmead, to Waverly's country place over the week-end ten days ago; he wouldn't have done that unless they were on speaking terms, at least."

"But Waverly himself wasn't there," McCarty replied. "Ask Mrs. Waverly if you like; I did, over the telephone this afternoon, and she said business had kept her husband in town. Waverly must have thought for some reason that Creveling had given him the slip, early on Thursday evening,

for he tore into the Cosmopolitan Club like a mad bull looking for him, but Creveling 'phoned to him not to be late, that he was expecting him at half-past twelve. Waverly must have had it all planned out what he meant to do, but he sent for his car then and drove all around town, waiting for the time to come. Have either of you noticed in the last few days the fresh-scarred curbstone in front of the Creveling house? Waverly bent his mud-guard and twisted his axle scraping against it when he finally drew up at the place.

"There's no use going into what happened between them then, for we'll never know that either, but they made a farce of eating supper together and then the quarrel was renewed in the library. For some reason Waverly flaunted that card in front of Creveling—the nine of diamonds that I handed him back an hour ago—and then the end came.

"Waverly must have left the house as if the fiends were after him then and driven around like mad until nearly morning. We've a witness who can testify to his distraught condition when he brought his car back to the garage and that there was blood on him. When I questioned him later at the Belterre Hotel—where he tried at first to say he'd been all night, though I'd seen him go in myself not half an hour before—he gave me another alibi and the name of a man who could prove it, and it was only late last night I found out from a third party that the man had lied and he admitted it. I needn't go any further, gentlemen; that's our case and we can prove every step of the way."

For a moment after he had finished there was silence and then O'Rourke passed a shaking hand across his brow.

"Great God!" he groaned. "It seems incredible! I can't believe it of Waverly, and yet—! What do you say, Nick?"

"I don't know what to say!" the other responded. "I never thought it would come to that between them, but we all know Waverly's violent, uncontrollable temper; how he

beat that hunting mare of his to death with an iron trace chain! It would be like him, granted sufficient real or fancied justification, to go about revenge in a bull-headed rage without counting the cost. God, it's horrible!—But you said a decision rested with us? What decision?"

"Just this, sir. I told Mr. O'Rourke over the 'phone to-day that we'd got wind of certain things down at headquarters; we had, but not what he thought. I told him to-night that I wanted to scare Mr. Waverly into telling me what he knew of the motive for the murder of Mr. Creveling." McCarty smiled to himself as he added: "I didn't tell, though, that I intended to let Waverly see that we knew the truth and make him confess! I said that I was here to do whatever was in my power to keep trouble from coming to all of you and I'm still here for that purpose, but we've others to consider now—two women."

"Mrs. Kip—?" O'Rourke asked in a low voice.

"No, she'll never speak. I meant Mrs. Creveling and Mrs. Waverly. We've a great opportunity straight from Providence! Mr. Waverly died of heart disease or a stroke at the card table; we'll let the doctor have his way about that when we call him in. Was Creveling murdered or did he kill himself? That is the question that we in this room have got to answer to the world."

"Gad, I never thought of that!" O'Rourke sprang from his chair. "You wanted Waverly to speak, Timmie, but you'd have a hell of a time finding anything out from him now! We've got a chance to hush everything up and no one need ever know! Poor little Stella Waverly will be spared this crowning disgrace, after all the indignities he has heaped on her for years—!"

"And Mrs. Creveling?" McCarty interrupted. "There's one that'll have to be told, Mr. O'Rourke. Aside from it being her right to know, she'll never rest until she finds out the truth and in her search for it she might drag in inno-

cent people and dig up things that are far better left buried."

"If you tell her you might as well tell the world!" Cutter shrugged again. "Her sense of justice won't be satisfied till she cries Waverly's name from the house-tops when she knows why they quarreled!"

"She'll go after the—the cause of that quarrel, too, tooth and nail, and though you couldn't blame her, I must say my sympathies are with Mrs. Waverly, for she's the weaker of the two. It would be one thing to live down the fact that your husband had committed suicide and another to have his memory branded as a murderer!"

"What if we were to tell Mrs. Creveling the truth and persuade her to keep it a secret forever, for the sake of the other woman who would suffer needlessly?" McCarty urged. "We could tell her the truth about the manner of her husband's death, but the cause—! Gentlemen, they quarreled over a game of cards!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST HAND

“**A**ND so you are going back to the old country?” McCarty asked. “I’ll miss you both sorely, for ’twas a breath of the times that are gone that you brought with you, Lady Peggy!”

It was a month later and McCarty sat beside Mrs. O’Rourke in the deep window seat of her little sitting-room.

“It’s best.” She spoke with a slight tightening of her lips. “America has not been unkind to us and some of the friends we found were good and true, but since John found out the truth about Mr. Waverly’s crookedness through Mr. Ford exposing him in the papers for cheating at cards he’s disgusted. He wants to go back and settle down and be ‘the’ O’Rourke once more and I—I shall be so glad!”

“You’ll be happier there,” said McCarty in a low tone. “Did you ever know that my grandmother was born with a caul and I’ve a bit of a knack at telling fortunes? People would laugh at it here but you—I believe the fairies still dance for you at the turn of the moon!”

“I wonder!” She was gazing off into space and her blue eyes had misted. “I wonder if they will come back?—But will you tell me my fortune, Mr. McCarty? I promise not to laugh but to believe you true!”

She held out her small palm and he took it very gently as though it were a fragile thing that might break in his clasp.

“There’s a long life before you, Lady Peggy, a useful and happy life, and contentment of mind. You’ve known

all the sorrow that'll ever come to you, and the way is clear now, and sunny and peaceful." He drew a deep breath and added slowly and very deliberately: "I wonder how so delicate a bit of a hand could stand the kick of a .44?"

Her eyes met his quickly and clung there, widening and darkening even as she shrank slowly from him and the blood ebbed from her lips. The shrill laughter of children playing in the park across the avenue came floating up to the open window on a breeze that was laden with the perfume of blossoming wisteria.

When she spoke at last her voice was very low, but clear and steady.

"You know, then? I'm glad, I think." Then after a little silence: "How long have you known?"

"Since the last time I came here; that Sunday night, do you remember? I'd come for a bit of a chat with himself and he brought me in here to you. You were sitting at that desk over there writing a letter and as I stepped up to you to shake hands I looked down; I don't know what made me for I hadn't a thought of the truth." He paused. "The words you had written stared up at me as though they were in letters of flame and I knew the writing; I'd been looking for it ever since a certain note came into my hands with seven words at the bottom of it. 'I accept. Expect me half-past twelve.'

"Of course I'd known from the minute I stood beside that supper table in the other house that a woman and not a man had been there; the remains of that supper showed that it had been light and fancy, not at all the sort of stuff for the hearty appetites of two men, and I thought I could guess what had happened but I wasn't sure. When I knew who the woman was I couldn't think at first why she had done it. There was some one who I thought could tell me, but—but I got no hint from his lips. I think the whole story of it is clear to me now."

"I wonder if it is?" she said slowly. "You know the

old, reckless, gambling strain in the blood of both John and me, Mr. McCarty."

"The fine old sporting strain!" he exclaimed. "Tell me why you did it, Lady Peggy; why you killed him!"

"I am trying to do so," she replied. "We're as poor as church mice, you know. The rents at home were getting lower and lower and the dear old castle tumbling about our ears. John had a wild idea about coming to America and getting rich as quickly as some millionaires do here, and so we came and got in with Mr. Cutter and all that set. I loved the cards, too; the gambling fever was strong in me as well as in him. Soon I was deep in debt and I couldn't bear to tell him, for he had lost, also, and the disgrace of it stared me in the face, sleeping and waking!"

"The man who—who died in his study that night had been very kind. I did not realize that it was all part of a game, a horrible, vile game which none of my sort had ever played. He knew the position I was in, he offered to lend me money and I was weak enough to accept it. I gave him notes, of course, and I always hoped to win back enough to pay him, but I lost instead; he saw to that! When I was in too deep to extricate myself he put on the screws and I was desperate! I knew that John would never forgive me if he knew and there was no one to whom I could turn. He—that man—demanded that I come and have supper with him; he said he had a proposition to make whereby I could repay him, and he was so plausible that I half believed him, yet I was afraid, for all that.

"He said if I came that I should have my notes back; that he would trust to my word, and at last I consented. He sent a peremptory message summoning me and I went, but I took the pistol with me; it was one that a servant of ours had carried in the war and left here when he went West.

"I stole like a thief out of my own house and down the

Avenue to his, and made a pretense of eating the supper which was laid out. I even tried to smoke a cigarette but the amber holder broke in my fingers. It was after supper, in the study, that he laid his cards on the table and I had no choice. I was alone there with him, and it meant his life against what was more to me than my own. You understand now, don't you, Mr. McCarty?"

"Yes." He nodded very gravely. "All but about that nine of diamonds."

"That card! You found it?" She glanced quickly at him and then away. "It was a lucky card, a mascot which Mr. Waverly had given me. I knew its history; once before, the words 'no quarter' had been written across the face of it and I took it with me to show that man, if his intentions toward me were really as black as I feared, that I, too, would give no quarter! I did show it to him, but he countered by showing me my promissory notes and telling me that in the morning they would be in my husband's hands if I did not surrender. The card fell to the floor, and afterwards—afterwards when he, too, lay at my feet I looked down and saw it. I picked it up without thinking what I was doing and it was stained with his blood! A sort of horror seized me then and I thrust it under something, I don't know what. I took my notes, laid the pistol beside his hand and stumbled out of the house. I don't know how I got home; I don't remember anything until I found myself in my own room, and all that had passed since I left—it seemed like a frightful dream."

"And that's all it is, Lady Peggy. A dream that you'll wake up from and forget when you're back in the old country again," McCarty said softly.

"Oh, what a friend you are!" Her eyes were shining as she turned them to his once more. "But why didn't you denounce me? Why didn't you speak when you knew? It was your duty, you were an officer of the law!"

"The law that man has made, maybe, but there's a higher law than that, and by it you were justified." He paused and added whimsically: "Would I go back on my own? You're Irish, too, Lady Peggy!"

THE END





